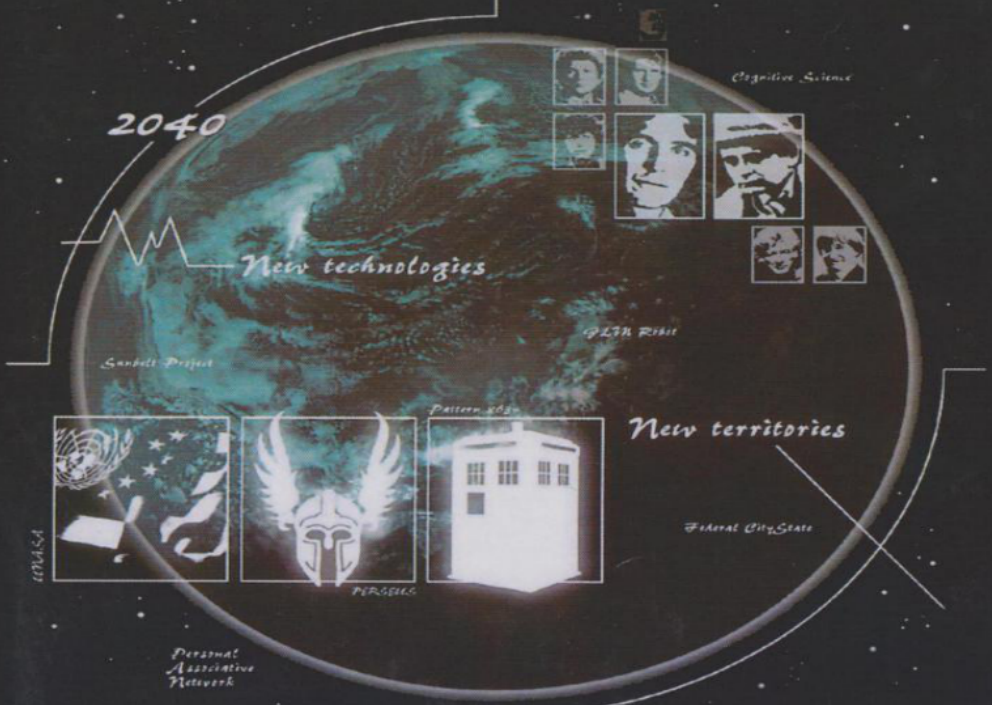
BIG FINISH

DOCTOR WHO

SHORT TRIPS: 2040

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY



EDITED BY

JOHN BINNS

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FOURTEEN BRAND NEW ADVENTURES IN TIME AND SPACE!



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The Nuclear Option

Richard Salter

Pm remembering things that didn't happen. I close my eyes and all I can see is the silver cloud. And yet here I am,

sitting under a concrete walkway, unable to eat the sandwich someone has handed me. I've fallen so far and I can't stop

falling. My eyes are open and everyone lives. My eyes are closed and there's nothing but blood and vomit and screams.

The two realities have mingled so much it's impossible to separate them, so I stop trying. I glance to my left and there's a

man downloading the day's news into his Personal Associative Network. He gives me a look of disdain and flips me a quarter. It

falls to my feet and I don't pick it up. Instead I look to my right and there's a woman crawling along the ground, clutching

at her face, trying to stop the blood belching from her nose. She implores me with her eyes, but I can't help her. I can

only watch. Her *eyes* are bleeding now, and her fingernails shatter as she claws at the tarmac. Seconds later she is dead.

But to my left, the man is walking away, reading the news and dodging the other commuters.

What the hell is going on

Interviewbot 192.177. Current location: *Col ege* & Spadina. Finding subject. . Subject found. Scan: Mi Hong, Liberal *voter,* single mother.

Reject subject. Finding subject. . Finding subject.. Subject found. Scan: *Michael Pedersen,* Conservative *voter, income average ($5ooK* p.a.), two children, *divorcee, resides in Rosedale,* acceptable subject. Height 170cm, adjusting to *eye-level.* Approaching.

'Mr Pedersen, may I ask you your opinion on current affairs?'

'Er, yeah, [glances at PAN] okay, but make it quick.'

'How are you planning to vote in next week's referendum?'

'No, of course. There's no way Canada should give up control of the military. The idea of the US having the power to use

our forces is just the worst thing that could happen. If anything we should be putting more money into Our own army.'

'Do you believe that, if the treaty is signed, Canada will ever call on the US military as will be her right?'

'[emphatic] Hell, no. We wouldn't dare call on the US to help us, and there's no way an American officer is ever going to

listen to a Canadian general. This whole thing is seriously one-way, and it's just another way the *US is* eroding Canadian

sovereignty. It's disgusting.'

'Thank you for your time.'

lnterviewbot 192.177 reviewing* subject's *answers. Responses are* sufficiently controversial. Filing *responses. Responses filed.

Finding subject. .

Roz Forrester could wait no longer. If they were going to do this, she wanted to do it now. Instead, the others sat around

planning. Sure, ifyou're intending to blow up a nuclear power station it makes sense to have an idea of what you're

doing before you walk in and start rewiring things at random, but the longer they hung around the more likely it was they

would get caught. Surely somebody must be on to them? Goddess, the police in this day and age were seriously lacking in

hardware and smarts. If she'd been on the case, every one of these lowlifes would be in a maximum security facility by

now.

Except the Doctor, of course, though sometimes she wondered if a spell behind bars might do him some good.

Knowing him he'd probably spent years doing time in the nineteenth century.

There he was, sitting cross-legged on the ground with a sheet of blueprints in front of him, with his silly hat

and ridiculous umbrella, planning a terrorist attack. He seemed so scarily out of place, like a child addressing congress.

They'd landed here a few weeks ago, and since then the Doctor had been infuriatingly unforthcoming as to the nature

of his plans. He had taken time to explain how nuclear power worked, a process that seemed remarkably inefficient

and dangerous to Roz's thirtieth-century ears.

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`So, splitting the atom generates electricity?'

`No, no, Roz; in this century there's no way to harness that energy in any other form but heat.'

'Oh, don't tell me they use steam to drive a turbine.'

Èxactly. The heat generated in the reactor boils the water, and the steam under pressure generates the power.'

`What a waste of all that energy.'

The Doctor smiled. 'You should see what they do with coal.'

`What's coal?'

It had sounded risky when the Doctor explained it to her, and now she was waiting while criminals plotted to take full

advantage of flaws in the power station's design. Every inch of her wanted to slam the scum into the dirt and read them

their rights. For the Doctor's sake she restrained herself.

`Clearly none of us wants to die,' Laura was saying. She was petite, pretty and the last person you'd expect to be

planning mass murder. `So aim to get out before the big bang.'

Àgreed,' Yousef replied. His accent was thick and his intentions anything but honourable. His narrow features made

him look like an accountant, but his eyes reflected deep intelligence and cunning. 'I am no use to my cause dead. Some

would martyr themselves to strike against the US and its allies, but I will keep on doing it until the day I die, preferably

of natural causes.'

Laura smiled. 'Nice speech.'

'It's not going to be easy. I'm going to need time.' Xin Chun had been quiet up to now, studying the data in silence.

Flipping his hat onto his head, the Doctor stood up. 'You'll have six hours, Mr Chun. I trust that will be sufficient.'

Xin shook his head. 'There are many safety systems that have to be disabled. I'll need more time.'

'What's the matter, Xin?' Laura asked. 'Your fee not generous enough?' 'The fee is fine. I worry about time.'

The Doctor chuckled. 'You worry about those safety systems,' he said, 'and let me worry about time.'

Roz rolled her eyes.

Joe Marquez was about ready to go home. It had been a dull day at the office, which had come as a welcome break after

the most recent round of shootings in Forest Hill. It was only 5pm, much earlier than he usually left for home, and he

was looking forward to spending some time with Clara and the baby. Perhaps he might even get a chance to run the

dogs while it was still light outside. That was always assuming he didn't get stuck on the 499 for three hours. He cursed

Clara's insistence that they buy a house in Sunderland, in the suburbs of Toronto. The commute was a killer. But the

borough of Whitby, where they had been living, was home to nearly one million people these days, and with the crime

rates going through the roof she'd argued that it was hardly the place to bring up a child. She had a point, he supposed,

but Christ, why not just move to Ottawa and be done with it?

He took his coffee mug to the sink and rinsed it out before placing it on the drying rack just as his boss passed by.

'Oh, Joe,' Craig said, backing up. Joe's heart sank. Hopes of leaving early faded fast. 'Listen, we've just had a crazy

brought in and normally, you know, I'd talk to him but I have that eye appointment thing, remember?'

'Craig, I was about to head out the door!' Joe wasn't usually one to argue, he knew it was hopeless anyway, but with

the number of hours he'd put in recently he felt he'd earned the right to leave on time.

'Sorry, Joe. Look, we'll make it up to you. I can't miss this appointment cause you know how long it'll take to

reschedule.'

'Well, can't Jane handle it?'

'Jane's working on the Lastman case. Besides, this is your area.' 'Can't we just hand him over to social?'

Craig shoved his PAN into the vending machine and retrieved a candy bar. 'Ordinarily, sure, but this guy's babbling

about some interesting shit, Joe.' 'Oh, yeah? Like what?'

'An attack on Pickering power station?'

'Is that thing still running?'

`Due to start decommissioning next week. Haven't you been watching the news?'

`Been kinda busy... So, this guy's talking crap, right? Hence the "crazy" moniker.'

Craig took a bite of his chocolate substitute and continued to talk with his mouth full. 'Joe, how long has the US been

on red alert?'

Àbout four years.' 4

`So, we've got orders to take any threat seriously, right? Jeez, how many times have I told you this?'

Ì have a selective memory when it comes to bullshit,' Joe retorted. 'All right, I'll do it, but tomorrow I leave at

four, okay?'

`Sure, Joe, whatever you say. Later.'

Joe picked up his mug and dried it off with a scummy tea towel. Resignedly, he poured a measure of stewed coffee

and took a sip. He winced. For a moment he considered making a fresh brew, but that would only delay him further.

When Joe reached the interview room, the man sitting behind the desk was in a state of agitation. He was big, blond

and dumb-looking with a terrified expression. He wore a once-brightly-coloured 'I am Canadian!' shirt and shorts

that had seen better days. His face was scuffed and his garments torn, as if he'd been forced to sleep rough for a week.

He also seemed ready to flee. Joe unclipped the stunstick on his holster so it hung loose and ready, and pushed open

the door.

Immediately the man was on his feet. Christ, he was tall, and strong-looking, too. He wore cuffs but they looked

tight on his wrists and ready to break. Joe's hand instinctively went to his stunstick again but he didn't draw it.

Instead he held out his other hand in a calming manner. 'Sit down, sir,' he insisted.

The big man retreated into a corner.

`Please, sir, sit down or I'm going to have to restrain you further.'

Eventually, the man sat back down, but he still looked wary. Slowly, carefully, Joe sat down opposite him. He took

out his PAN and placed it on the table between them. 'I'm gonna record this conversation, okay?' The big man nodded.

'Okay. Now, let's start with your name.'

`Cwej,' said the man. 'Chris Cwej.'

It was surprisingly easy to get in. Security consisted of an array of camerabots and two guards munching on

sandwiches. The Doctor had no problem disabling the cameras. Laura and Yousef took care of the guards. Roz couldn't

quite believe it. Here they were, practically strolling into the housing facility for a nuclear bomb, and there was almost

nothing to stop them.

The five of them hurried through a huge room the size of a hangar. On either side lay large yellow machines like

lazing armadillos with metal shells.

Roz guessed that these must be the turbines. Certainly the noise erupting from them was deafening.

Xin took the lead. 'The control room is this way,' he bellowed.

`Doctor, where is everyone?' Roz asked. 'Shouldn't there be staff?'

He didn't slow down as he answered, and it was hard to hear him over the sound of the turbines. The station is being

decommissioned, Roz. The union's unhappy about the mass lay-offs so most of the staff are on strike. The idea is to

delay the decommissioning and hopefully avert it altogether.'

`How old did you say this station is?'

'Nearly seventy,' Xin replied.

'Well, isn't it about time it was decommissioned? How long do these things last, anyway?'

They'd reached a metal ladder and one by one they ascended to the upper walkway. Laura answered as they climbed.

'It's long overdue. There've been calls to shut down Pickering B since the last century, but government after government

kept it going.'

'With the money they've spent over the years trying to keep this

place running,' Xin added as he reached the top,

puffing slightly, 'they could have bought enough wind turbines to power the whole country.'

They headed along the gangway until they reached a metal door with a viewport, which Laura peered through. She drew

her gun and Yousef followed suit. The pair of them burst through, startling the six technicians in the control room.

Five of them put up their hands, the sixth, a woman, went for the alarm. Laura shot her down, her gun going off with a

muted pop. The woman's chest caved in like she'd been punched with an invisible sledgehammer. Her broken

body thudded to the floor and twitched a few times. Then she became still but for the blood oozing from multiple tears.

The other technicians backed away, their eyes wide, some of them making small noises. Roz stared at them, catching the

eye of a man who knew he was about to die, and who *knew* she could do nothing to stop it. The guns fired again, but Roz's

eyes were now shut. She didn't want to have to open them ever again.

5 *6*

Eventually she did, but her head was turned towards the Doctor. His face was impassive, unmoved. Aware of the

façade she must continue to present, she settled for fuming behind her best poker face. How could the Doctor be so

calm?

'Xin, Doctor, get to work. Yousef and I will take care of the rest of the staff. Roz, prep your devices but don't plant

them until the station is clear. Wouldn't want them to be discovered.' She and Yousef headed back out of the control room.

Xin moved to the main console and, with obvious distaste, pul ed away the crushed remains of a body slumped over

the controls.

'Those two make me sick,' Xin said, wiping blood from the read-outs with a lab coat he'd found on the back of the

chair.

`You're not the only one,' Roz agreed, pulling off her backpack and opening it up. She wasn't the world's foremost

expert on explosives, but the Doctor had shown her how to work these devices and promised to tell her where to place

them. In the meantime all she had to do was prime them and look professional. She pulled the first device from her pack

and removed the metal casing, trying not to fumble.

Subject found. Scan: Stephanie *Croft,* Liberal *voter, income below average* ($245K *p.a.),* no children, *married, resides at Victoria Park and*

***Lawrence, acceptable* subject. Height: 166cm, adjusting to *eye-level.* Approaching.**

`Mrs Croft, may I ask you your opinion on current affairs?'

`Sure.'

`How are you planning to vote in next week's referendum?'

` [pause] I'll vote yes. It terrifies me what could happen if terrorists targeted Canada. We have to join forces with the only

people we can really trust, it's the only way to protect ourselves, you know?'

`Do you believe that, if the treaty is signed, Canada will ever call on the US military as will be her right?'

Òh, I doubt it. I suppose we might if we decide to invade somewhere. Not really our style, is it?'

`Thank you for your time.'

Chris Cwej had said nothing for the past five minutes. Joe was equally quiet, sitting opposite him, waiting for him to

speak. He didn't lay on any pressure; the guy hadn't been accused of anything yet. Joe had offered the big man some

coffee but he'd politely refused. He didn't want anything to eat either, preferring to just sit quietly and wait for Joe to say

something.

Once he was sure Cwej was calm enough to proceed, Joe began. He asked him why he was confused, asked him about the

attack on the power station, asked him who he came with, asked him why he was here.

The answers didn't make a lot of sense, but they made for disturbing listening.

We arrived a couple of months ago. The Doctor told Roz and me that we could take some time to ourselves, enjoy the sites,

travel if we wanted to. He recommended Montreal and Quebec City, even gave us passports. I couldn't wait to get going,

buying myself all the clothes and travel stuff I could find. Everything was so quaint and fun. Roz wasn't as interested. She

preferred to spend most of her time in the bar until the Doctor called for her. I felt a bit put out, I must admit. It feels as

though the Doctor is always giving Roz things to do. I guess she's just more capable than me. That's fine, I don't have a

problem with that. I just wish he'd tell me what's going on. Anyway, about three days ago, he met me in a cafe on the

Danforth.

Ìt's happening, Chris,' he told me, sipping at his Orangina through a curly Straw.

`What's happening, Doctor?' I replied. I'd bought myself an espresso and four or five donuts. I love twenty-first-

century donuts. Sorry, I'm digressing. `What I came here to do.'

'And what's that?'

Ì can't tell you.'

I growled at him. I actually growled! He looked quite surprised. 'Then why did you want to meet me here?'

Ì need you to do something for me.'

'No.'

'Chris!'

`No, Doctor, not until you tell me what you're up to.'

Ì'm not in the mo 7

od.'

`Doctor, why won't you tell me?' I was shouting now, drawing attention. The Doctor waved his hat at me desperately,

trying to keep me quiet. `Shh, Chris. Please! I can't tell you, that's why.'

'Why not?'

'Because you wouldn't approve!'

I was quiet after that, and soon after everyone else in the café went back to ignoring us. I didn't know what to say. I

know the Doctor's done some questionable things, but I also know that his intentions are good. He usually does the right

thing.

If he didn't want to reveal any more then he must have his reasons. He told me that in three days he would be at Pickering

power station on the shores of Lake Ontario, and that I was to come there at a certain time and bring the authorities. He

didn't care how I got them to come, said that was up to me, but I had to be on time. I told him I would do my best, and I've

not seen him since.

'That's all he told you?' Joe asked, surprised at how fascinating he

found Cwej's story. All thoughts of going home had

been banished from his mind. He'd talked to many liars before, been told thousands of tall stories. But Cwej didn't strike

him as a liar. The ring of truth permeated his words.

`Pretty much.'

`So, when do you need to be there?' Joe heard himself ask.

`Soon,' Cwej said.

`Should we leave right now?'

Chris shook his head. There were actually tears in his eyes. 'No, there's no point.'

Joe frowned `Why?'

'The Doctor failed. The power station has already exploded.'

* * *

Laura and Yousef had yet to return and Xin was intent on his work at the console, his tongue clamped firmly between

his lips in concentration. So Roz took the opportunity to take the Doctor to one side. She hated being kept in the dark

and told him so. 'Why are we here?'

The Doctor rested his chin on his umbrella and gazed into her eyes. 'I told you, Roz. We're here to prevent a nuclear

explosion that will kill thousands immediately, thousands more within a day and affect countless millions in the months

and years to come. We're trying to stop a large chunk of Canada and the United States from turning into a massive

exclusion zone. We're trying to make sure millions of people can carry on living in this city.'

Roz glared at him. She knew it wasn't that simple. She wanted to press him but he had already gone back to Xin.

Òpen valve XCii just a fraction more. The reactor's burning slightly too hot. I don't want anyone seeing a big

fluctuation in the power output so take it down slowly.'

`Doctor,' said Xin indignantly, 'this is a nuclear reactor. I'm doing everything slowly.'

`Good!' the Doctor replied, clapping him lightly on the shoulder. Ì had no idea you knew about these things,'

Xin commented.

Ì have some idea of the technology,' the Doctor replied, peering at a bloodstained display panel. 'But don't worry, my

academic knowledge of the subject is no match for your considerable experience in the field.'

`You used to run one of these?' Roz asked Xin.

He rubbed his nose and pointed to a bank of instrumentation against the far wall. 'Doctor, can you find out which

turbine isn't running at the same speed as the others? It's playing havoc with these calibrations.'

The Doctor nodded and moved to the far side of the room.

Xin kept working while he answered Roz's question. 'I used to operate one in the States. They didn't pay me much so I

quit and starting selling nuclear secrets to developing nations. I used to build dirty bombs for an al-Qa'ida cell in Syria

before I came back to North America to work freelance.'

`You've led an exciting life,' Roz commented, trying to keep her tone civil.

Ì've gotten pretty rich. But this is my last job. I don't want to push my luck. I have enough to retire on, what more do I

need?'

`Very sensible. So, what's your plan here?' she asked, perching on the edge of the control desk. Xin kept his eyes fixed on the

bewildering array of instruments and flashing lights. A small bead of sweat had formed at his left temple.

`Scarily there's not much I need to do. The entire station is in such a state of disrepair that just one carefully placed

explosive will melt the core in seconds.'

Ànd that's bad?'

Xin broke his fixed gaze for a second to allow himself an incredulous stare at Roz. 'You've never heard of a core

meltdown? Does Chernobyl mean nothing to you?'

'No, should it?'

His attention was back on the control board, but his tone conveyed his disbelief. 'Well, Chernobyl's way before our

time, but you must remember Turkey Point 3 in the twenties.'

Roz caught the Doctor's glance in her direction and realised she was showing up her lack of cultural knowledge. 'Oh,

yeah, right, vaguely. Remind me, anyway.'

`Chernobyl or Turkey Point 3?'

`Well, the worst was Chernobyl, in Ukraine, over half a century ago. They were running a routine test of the safety

systems when some clown authorised the power generation levels to be reduced, causing a problem with positive void

coefficient.'

Ùm, Xin, I'm the explosives expert, remember?'

'Fine, long story short then. The core became unstable and exploded, blowing the roof off the power station and

releasing a huge cloud of highly radioactive particles into the atmosphere. Thousands of misinformed and unprotected

firefighters died trying to put out the blaze, and many many more people died or suffered serious health problems across

the continent.'

'And that's what we're trying to do here?'

Xin scoffed. 'Why else did you bring the explosives? You're a week late for Victoria Day.'

The Doctor was waggling his fingers at a bank of lights, most of which were flashing red. 'Does this mean what I think

it means?' he enquired.

Xin glanced up. 'Half the pumps aren't working.'

`That's bad, too, right?' Roz ventured.

Ìndeed it is, Roz,' the Doctor explained. Ìf any one of the remaining pumps fails then the reactor won't be cooled fast

enough by heavy water to prevent overheating.'

'Meltdown?'

'Meltdown. Unless the safety systems shut it down first, but most of them aren't working either.'

'Christ, we don't need to be here at all!' Xin said. 'This station is ready to go up all on its own. Look at this. SDS2 is

supposed to inject high-pressure liquid poison into the core in order to shut it down automatically if it overloads. But

the poison tanks are all empty!'

'The system does seem somewhat precarious...' the Doctor agreed. `Precarious? It's a joke! I've never seen this much

neglect. I don't even want to be sitting in this control room.'

The Doctor came over behind Xin's console, placed his hands on top and iced the engineer. 'Please calm down, Mr

Chun. It's very important we all do our part.'

Xin grumbled quietly but didn't reply.

`Have you managed to shut down all the safety systems?' the Doctor pressed him.

`SDS2 didn't need any help from me,' Xin replied softly. 'SD& is off line.' `What does that do?' Roz asked.

The Doctor explained. 'Shut Down System i is designed to drop control rods into the core to separate the fuel rods

and stop the reaction.'

`Does it work?'

`Surprisingly, yes. It still works, I think.' Xin didn't sound too convinced. Ànyway, it's off line now.'

Ànd the Emergency Core Cooling System?' the Doctor asked.

`The ECCS is off line now. Damn backup computer wanted to take over so I disabled it completely.'

The Doctor turned to Roz and put his hat on his head. `Time to place those explosives, Roz.'

10

She hefted her backpack and prepared to move out. She only got as far as the door when the alarms went off and red

lights started flashing.

`What the hell is that?' Roz asked. 'Do they know we're here?'

Xin had a look of panic on his face. 'No, it's not that kind of alarm.' Roz felt fear choking her. She wanted to be

anywhere but here.

`Steam pressure is rising to critical levels!' Xin cried. 'The coolant is

evaporating!'

The Doctor's hands danced across a control panel like he was steering his equally rickety TARDIS. He had to yell over

the blaring sirens, and the words he chose struck terror into Roz's heart.

`Positive void coefficient!'

I knew it was time to head for the police station so I took the ferry back from Centre Island and headed for the streetcar.

There were a few people waiting with me, and when the car eventually hovered into view down the centre of Queens Quay

we made ready to board, PANs in hand to pay our fare. The spring sun was shining and people seemed upbeat and

happy, glad that winter was becoming a distant memory for another year and looking forward to all the fun and promise

of summer.

The bang was so loud it knocked us from our feet.

The shelter shattered, showering a man in shards of glass. The windows of all the buildings along the street blew out,

raining glass and debris down on the road. Cars swerved and collided with each other. One ploughed into the streetcar at

speed, knocking it from its magnetic tracks and sending it hurtling through a storefront.

In seconds the relative serenity had been turned into a devastating nightmare. There were screams and burglar

alarms and confusion.

But we ignored all of that. We'd risen to our feet, everyone looking to the east.

A huge cloud filled the sky, dark and foreboding like an impending storm. But this was no ordinary cloud. It shimmered

and flashed rainbow colours and shone like polished cutlery.

This cloud had one hell of a silver lining.

We stood in awe, unable to move, captivated by its beauty and its strangeness and the shocking unreality of what

was happening.

'The power station,' someone said, unable to believe their own words. A gust of wind blew over us, travelling

westwards. Strong.

And then people panicked.

'But that didn't happen.' Joe said, almost doubting himself. He had spent the day inside filing reports. Was it possible he'd

missed an explosion? You work in a police station, he told himself, this would be one of the first places to find out. 'It

didn't happen,' he repeated, more to reassure himself.

'I know,' said Chris. 'if it had happened, we wouldn't be sitting here. If we'd even survived we'd be thirty kilometres away

by now. I know it didn't happen, but. .'

The two men sat in silence for a moment. Joe told himself that this was nuts. The guy was clearly one Timbit short of

a full box. He glanced at his PAN. The time was 7.05pm. Only an hour or so left of daylight. His stomach grumbled and he felt

thirsty. He picked up his coffee mug but the half-drained contents were stone cold, so he put it down again.

'Do you want some water?' Joe asked, looking for an excuse to leave the mom for a moment to collect his thoughts.

Cwej nodded, so Joe rose and walked to the door.

'I saw it,' Cwej said to Joe's back.

Joe pushed open the door and left the room without looking back.

'How the hell did this happen?' Laura shouted over the alarms. 'And please stop that alarm!'

'I can't,' Xin replied, spinning his chair around to face another control bank. 'It's wired into the reactor monitoring

systems, and believe me you do not want me to turn that off.'

'Can you bring down the steam pressure?' Yousef cried, rushing over to help. Xin pushed him out of the way.

'I need space,' he s 1112

aid. 'Give me space.'

The alarm stopped. Laura, Yousef and Roz looked at each other in surprise. Yin's eyes darted from one read-out to the next.

'The core's stabilising,' he breathed. 'But —'

'Don't ask questions,' the Doctor snapped. 'Just get valve SV2 opened now.'

He was standing with his back to a control console, balanced on one foot.

The other was holding up a lever, he had one hand modulating a control dial

and the tip of his umbrella was holding a button in place. He looked

ridiculous, but given that he'd just saved all their lives, Roz wasn't about to point it out.

Xin rushed to comply, and once he signalled that he had done as the Doctor asked, the Time Lord was free to release his

hold and put both feet back on the floor.

`What did you do?' Xin seemed genuinely baffled.

`There's a safety control valve that allows excess steam pressure to be released, thus alleviating the pressure in the

system that can cause a power surge in the reactor. I released it into the vacuum building.'

`What's the vacuum building?' Roz asked.

Ìt's a big silo that's designed to suck in any radioactive particles released by a reactor in the event of an accident,' Xin

replied. 'But I didn't think there'd be time to do that!'

The Doctor tutted and strode across the room towards Xin. `So, you tried to lower all the control rods into the reactor.

You know that's a very dangerous thing to do.'

`There's a fifty-fifty chance it will cause the reactor to produce even more heat,' said Xin, taking a step back.

À power surge, Mr Chun.' The Doctor was just inches away from the

engineer's face now. 'You nearly blew us all up. How do you feel about that?' Ì thought that was the plan,' Xin shot back,

trying to seem unfazed.

`Not now, Mr Chun, not yet.'

`None of us wants to die,' Laura said, interposing herself between the men. Ì didn't intend for this to happen,' Xin

insisted. 'I'm doing the job of six operators here. I can't keep my eye on everything.'

`Thank God the Doctor was here then,' Laura said. 'Or we'd have all been martyrs.'

Ìt wouldn't be so bad,' Yousef said quietly.

Laura turned to him. 'I thought you wanted to live, too.'

Ì do, but there are worse ways to go. I'd rather die in the hot flash of a melting nuclear reactor than rot in prison for

the rest of my days.'

Òn that cheery thought,' said the Doctor, 'it's time to plant the explosives. The reactor's still running but we blew out

some major control systems in that last overload. Another build-up of steam pressure like that and we'll all *be* dead.'

People were running in all directions and nobody knew where to go. Some were trying to use their PANs to contact loved

ones or to gather information, but the network had collapsed under the load, or because of the explosion. Someone yelled

for people to make for the subway, to get underground, but I knew the intake vents drew air from the outside so anybody

down there would receive a concentrated dose. Instead I realised my best bet would be to find somewhere sealed from the

outside air, entirely self-contained. No ideas presented themselves.

The sky was dark overhead now, and the air was growing thick with dust. People struggled to breathe. One lady to my

right staggered and collapsed. People around me were starting to retch, some were bringing up bile. Noses bled, at first

with just a few flecks of blood on the lips, but in some cases the result was a steady stream. One man staggered towards me,

his skin bright red, his shirt covered in blood, hacking and coughing from the dust in his lungs.

The effect was delayed on me, I don't know why. It was getting hard to breathe, and when I put my hand to my lips it

came away red.

I ran then. I couldn't take any more. These people had taken the full force of a radioactive dust cloud and there was no

hope for any of them. I figured my time was up, too.

'You're hallucinating, it's the only answer.'

Cwej sat quietly. He examined the considerable amount of dirt encrusted beneath his fingernails and picked aimlessly at

it.

'I wish I was.'

'But you're okay now?'

'I'm not jumping back and forth between timelines now. I feel like I must have died in the other reality or something. I

don't really understand it. At least I'm not seeing people dying any more, unless I close my eyes.'

Joe didn't really follow what Cwej was saying but he felt compelled to do something. He tapped his fingers on the keyboard

of his PAN.

'What are you doing?' Cwej asked.

'I've sent out a call to the patrol in Pickering nearest the power station. They're going to swing by and check the place

out. Would that make you feel better?'

Cwej nodded

'Good. They'll call me if they find anything.'

'How are we going to get up there?' Roz asked, staring up at the network of

ipes leading to huge steam generators, which hung like giant elongated bulbs above their heads. Every so often,

the generators would belch steam into the stuffy atmosphere, and Roz wondered just what those steam clouds

PContained. Higher still was the impressive concrete-domed ceiling of the factor building. Before them, lying on its side,

was a large red cylinder booked up to metal pipes and machinery.

'We don't need to,' the Doctor replied over the noise of the generators. 'In let, your explosives probably wouldn't do

much damage to the roof or the Concrete walls. They're about four feet thick.'

'So if we blow up the reactor, how is the radioactive material going to Owe?'

'If Mr Chun has done his job properly, the melting core will cause such a huge explosion that it will rip the roof clean

off.'

`So, where do the explosives go?'

The Doctor pointed to the red cylinder. 'The calandria,' he said. 'The reactor core itself. That's where you're going to

place your bomb, Adjudicator Forrester.'

Roz resisted making a run for the exit.

`But first, we have to close off the vacuum building.'

They were descending now, back to the lower floor. The noise was not so deafening down here, and the stuffy heat of the

place was slightly less oppressive.

`The vacuum building is constantly maintained at an air pressure lower than the norm,' the Doctor explained, not

having to raise his voice so much now 'In the event of the release of any radioactive materials, the idea is it will all be

sucked into the vacuum. If we're going to make this work we need to manually close off the valves that feed the vacuum

building.'

`Doctor, may I ask a question?'

They had reached a bank of pressure wheels and gauges. The Doctor studied the layout of the control panel for a

few moments and then began spinning the red-handled wheels. Roz watched the needles of various dials begin to drop.

She assumed they indicated the pressure in the vacuum building and in here.

`You can ask me anything you like, Roz.'

`We are here to stop these people, right? I mean, you seem to be going to an awful lot of trouble to help them.'

The Doctor stopped and turned. He rubbed at his eyes, pushing the brim of his hat higher up his forehead with the back

of his hand.

`Listen to me, Roz. Everything I do is being monitored. I've won Laura's trust, but Yousef doesn't know me from

Adam. I've noticed that everything I've been doing, he's been double-checking. He's probably in the control MOM right

now, making Xin prove to him that I'm doing what I say I'm doing. If I don't seal off the vacuum building they'll be able

to tell from the read-outs in the control room, and they'll know I'm not on their side. Now, you're the explosives expert so

it's entirely feasible that you don't know the first thing about nuclear power stations. That's why I've indulged your

questions in front of the others. But from now on, you must not give anything away. Nothing. Do you understand? These

people are killers, dangerous fanatics. They may not be willing to sacrifice themselves for their causes, but they are

willing to kill others. Many, many others.'

Ì understand, Doctor,' said Roz. She wasn't a child, and if it were any other man talking to her in this way she'd probably

break his neck. But this was the Doctor, the man who inspired Chris Cwej's unwavering loyalty, which explained why

the Doctor had left him in Toronto and brought her on this mission. With a sudden horrible realisation, Roz found herself

wondering if she'd been brought along to act as the Doctor's conscience. How far was he

prepared to go? If she hadn't been here, would he have just ensured that the other three all suffered some convenient

accident? Come to think of it, why hadn't he put a stop to all this already? She'd experienced the depth of his cunning

on many occasions. She knew he was capable of sabotaging the attack without arousing suspicion. Maybe he already

had and she'd missed something important. Maybe he was about to cross the line.

The Doctor spun another wheel. There was a loud hiss of escaping air from somewhere above their heads. He started

speaking, clearly using the noise above them to mask his words. She had to strain to hear him. Ì'll let you in on a little

secret, Roz. Ms Laura Collinson is American, as you can tell from her accent, but she's hardly a free agent striking at

America's allies to teach her fellow countrymen a lesson.'

'Who is she then?' Roz asked, trying to keep her voice just loud enough for the Doctor to hear her, and nobody else.

'She works for the US government, Roz. She's a CIA agent.'

'Why would the US government want to blow up a Canadian power station? I thought the US wanted to amalgamate

Canada and turn it into a new state.'

'They do, and this is the final step towards their goal. Once Canada effectively signs its military over to US control,

it'll be the beginning of the end *for* this nation's sovereignty. And what better way to convince Canada that it can't defend

itself without US assistance than to stage an horrific terrorist attack with potentially devastating consequences for this

country's largest city.'

'It's all a show,' Roz realised. 'Laura has no intention of blowing up this power station, she just wants Canada to know

how close it came to disaster.'

'She's playing with fire. Yousef is the real thing, a genuine terrorist with American blood on his hands. He'll be the one

she pins this attack on when she calls the Canadian authorities

and press and tells them, "Hello, I'm the CIA operative

who infiltrated a terrorist cell here in Canada and foiled a plot to kill millions of your citizens and render your financial

capital uninhabitable Sot the next four thousand years." You can see how that might sway popular opinion in favour of

signing away Canada's military to the only country who might save them from disaster, can't you?'

'But it's Canada's links to the US that makes them a target for Yousef's allies in the first place.'

'Indeed. For many, many years, Canada has been ignored by terrorist Organisations. It just isn't worth their while,

and it doesn't have the same policies of expansionism as the US. But the US is running low on precious resources and on

inhabitable space. It's eyeing Canada's vast land mass and rich resources, and it wants them for itself.'

'So what if this power station goes kablooey?'

'That's the last thing the US government wants. They want this country intact when they storm in and take over.'

The noise from the steam vents had dissipated now, and the Doctor took off

his hat and waved it in front of his face. Roz turned up her nose at the sudden stench.

`My word,' said the Doctor. `The air in there hasn't been mixed with anything fresh for quite a while. Come on, Roz,

I'll show you where to place your bombs.' And with that he headed off again, back towards the calandria.

Roz had the horrible feeling that whether Laura got her way or Yousef did, the result would not be good for her or her

annoyingly cheerful companion.

Joe's PAN started playing 0, *Canada.* He acknowledged the call by waving his hand over the screen.

`Marquez here,' Joe said, his gaze fixed on Cwej's hollow eyes.

`Joe? This is Claire. I'm at Pickering B. Grace just found two dead security guards outside reactor seven. We're

awaiting backup before we go in. Thought you should know.'

`Thanks, Claire. We'll be right there.' Joe deactivated his PAN and put it back in his pocket 'Well, Mr Cwej. It looks

as though you may be onto something.'

Cwej just looked m iore confused.

Àre we ready?' Laura asked.

Yousef nodded. `The complex is clear. There's nobody left alive to raise the alarm.'

'All safety systems are off line and the reactor is stabilised,' Xin reported. Roz cleared her throat 'The charges are

set.'

Laura smiled. 'Excellent work, team!' she said, sounding like the manager of a department store after a day of

particularly brisk sales. 'Where's the remote?'

Silently, the Doctor handed over a small tubular device with a button at the end. Laura took it and clipped it to her belt

`Time to leave,' she said. `Try not to leave anything behind.'

`Why does it matter?' Xin asked. Ìt's all going to be blown to pieces anyway.'

Laura kept smiling, though suddenly it seemed more forced. 'Anything could happen between now and detonation,

Xin. It's always prudent to cover your tracks, even if you intend to blow the crap out of them later.'

`Very wise,' commented the Doctor from his position in front of a bank of security monitors.

Laura turned to him. `Something wrong, Doctor?'

`Well, there are some people outside the main entrance. They look like police.'

Laura dropped the bag she was packing and hurried over. 'Oh sh — We have to go. Now!'

*** * ***

The grounds were now crawling with police, and the military had been called In to support them. When Joe and

Cwej pulled up outside, it didn't take them long to find Craig amongst the throng.

`Joe? What are you doing here? I asked you to assist in the evacuation preparations.'

'I had to come, Craig. Mr Cwej here gave us the tip in the first place.' 'He shouldn't be here, Joe. This is a secure

area.'

Cwej spoke up, almost too quietly to hear over the noise of the military checking their weapons and vehicles going back

and forth.

'I know someone in there,' he said. 'The Doctor's trying to defeat the bad guys. He's working on disarming them all

right now. He won't let the terrorists win.'

The announcement chilled Roz's insides. What if the police stormed the place and shot them all dead? The roar of the

turbines was making her teeth ache. How long had she been here? It felt like at least half her lifetime.

'Is there another way out?' Laura asked. She sounded desperate.

'All the exits are covered, Laura. There's no escape.' The Doctor popped his 'p' with satisfaction. Clearly Chris had

brought the cavalry, but what was the Doctor's next move? He wasn't being very subtle about it.

'You *are completely* surrounded. Exit the plant with your *hands* on your head and you wil not *be harmed.'*

'They're lying,' Yousef observed. 'If we leave this building we're as good as dead.'

'Yes, thanks for that.' Laura wiped sweat from her forehead. They were standing in the middle of the huge turbine

building, unsure of which way to tarn. 'What tipped them off?'

If Laura was nervous, Xin was in a blind panic. 'We have to get out of here!' he cried. 'I don't want to die!'

'Shut up, Chun,' snapped Yousef.

'There's only one way out of this now, Laura.' The Doctor's tone was dangerous, warning.

Laura regarded him with wide eyes. 'You're not serious.'

The Doctor approached her, the brim of his hat casting a shadow over his eyes. He seemed to rise in stature, his presence

no longer seemingly dwarfed by the mighty machinery surrounding him.

'I'm deadly serious.'

'No, no, please. Please don't even think id' Xin was nearly hysterical. Roz moved to his side and placed a hand on his shoulder

but he shrugged it off. *Laura, no! This wasn't part of the deal!'

'Too bad, Chun,' Yousef sneered. 'You knew the risks. We cannot be 'captured, too many others would be

compromised. It's time we made the ultimate sacrifice.'

Laura shook her head but couldn't tear her eyes away from the Doctor's gaze. `This is not a democracy,' she said to

Yousef.

`Push the button,' the Doctor urged her. `Make your mark on history. Make an impact on the world it won't soon

forget.'

`The Doctor's right,' Yousef said. `Do it now before they storm this place and we miss our chance.'

`Nor Laura barked. Her gun was in one hand, the detonator in the other. She swung it between the Doctor and Yousef.

Yousef drew his own weapon. The Doctor didn't even flinch.

`Push the button!' the Doctor snarled, louder this time. Ìt's the only way, Laura. We're all dead anyway so you might as

well take this entire city with you!' Òh, no no no,' Xin blurted. `This is nuts. This is nuts!'

`More nuts than detonating a nuclear device in a crowded city?' Roz snapped at him.

`PUSH IT!' The Doctor's face was just inches away from Laura's. There were tears in her eyes.

Yousef jammed his gun against her head. `Do it now!'

Laura dropped her weapon and fell to her knees. She was sobbing. Ì can't. I can't do it.'

The Doctor stood over her. 'Tell them why you can't do it, Laura.'

She lifted her head and glared defiantly at him. His gaze did not waver and her head drooped.

`Because I work for the US government,' she said at last.

Xin couldn't believe it.

Àll this was supposed to scare Canada into signing its military over to the US. Nobody was supposed to die.'

Èxcept the plant workers,' the Doctor muttered.

`You bitch,' Yousef screeched, squeezing the trigger on his gun. But he was too slow. Roz had manoeuvred herself in

behind him and took great pleasure in cracking him over the head with the casing from one of the explosives.

The Doctor bent down and scooped up the trigger from where Laura had let it drop to the ground. Xin turned and fled, his

footsteps clanging on the metal walkway. He stopped dead when the military burst in. They had him surrounded and

on the floor in seconds. He didn't resist.

The Doctor placed his hands on the back of his head and indicated that Roz should do the same. She hated it, but if it kept

her alive she was willing to suffer the indignity.

`Doctor! Roz!' It was Chris, hurrying towards them across the vast space despite the efforts of two men accompanying

him to hold him back. When he reached them he swept them both off their feet in a bear hug `Thank Goddess you're okay.'

`We're fine, Chris,' Roz assured him. `The Doctor played a very dangerous game this time though.'

Chris's two accomplices joined them, introducing themselves as Stewart Trask and Joe Marquez.

'Did you gentlemen hear everything Ms Collinson said?'

'We did,' said Trask, holding up his PAN. 'We'll make sure the government bears about it too. We'll be needing

statements from each of you, of course, and we may need to detain you for a while longer while we sort everything out.'

Laura, Yousef and Xin were led away, leaving the three companions temporarily isolated.

'Doctor, I've been seeing things,' Chris said. Roz noticed how haggard he appeared. The usual youthful spark in his eyes,

present when he had seen hem across the turbine room, had faded now. He seemed older. She felt for him; he looked like

he'd been through hell. 'I saw this power station explode, Doctor. How can that be? We're still here. One moment I saw

people dying from radiation sickness, the next everything was fine.'

The Doctor seemed a little surprised and then troubled. He mumbled something, seemed evasive.

Roz was having none of it. 'Spill it, Doctor. You've kept enough secrets from us for at least three of your lifetimes.'

'What you saw was probably an echo,' he said reluctantly. 'We changed history today. You saw the difference between

one outcome and the other.' 'Why me?' Chris asked, not unreasonably.

'Probably because you're from a future where the outcome to this situation was. . different.'

Kos cocked an eyebrow. 'Different how?'

'You don't want to know.' The Doctor said.

He stood up and walked away, his spats tapping on the metal in time with the chink of his umbrella tip.

Roz placed a hand on Chris's shoulder. As glad as she was that they had all made it out alive, she wasn't sure she wanted

to be around either of them for the next little while at least. Seeing Chris kept that question at the forefront of her mind,

a question she didn't want to answer. She came from the same future as he did. Why had he experienced the alternative

and she had not?

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21

Joe shook Cwej's hand and wished him the best.

'Are you still seeing the hallucinations?' he asked, checking over the medical assessment that cleared the big man of

any foreign substances or ailments that might explain his waking nightmares.

'No,' Cwej replied. 'I think the timelines have stabilised now.'

Joe had no idea what he meant by that, but was happy that the big guy appeared to be happier now. As Joe left the police

station and headed for the parking lot (only six hours later than he had originally intended to leave work), he overheard

an Interviewbot accosting a passer-by.

*** * ***

Ìn light of the recent revelations that the US government faked a terrorist attack on a Canadian nuclear power

station, do you think that the government should sign the treaty to combine the military forces of both countries?'

` [laughs] You're kidding, right?'

Separation

Tara Samms

I

Manda blamed the ghosts on her bad night's sleep. She was overtired, run down. That was why she was seeing them now in the

living room, standing in the middle of her couch. Shouting at each other. Grabbing hold of one Another.

She hung back in the dark of her bedroom, holding herselfvery still. Waited for them to go like the last lot.

It was only her mind, playing tricks. There was an explanation for everything; she firmly believed that. Stress. Fatigue.

Even that syrup she took for her nerves. The label had warned it could have funny side effects.

Seeing ghosts was one thing. But why did they always have to shout so

much?

'You don't own me,' shouted the woman. (It was never the same woman twice.) The woman was smal and slight, like Manda

herself. Dressed in old fashioned clothes — tight white trousers and a bright pink top with a plunging neck. Brown hair matted.

One eye swollen and black, it seemed she couldn't lee out through it. It looked revolting, upsetting.

Both my eyes wil look *like that if I don't get some sleep* soon, thought Manda.

'You're my wife,' the man screamed, like it was a reason for the eye, an excuse. Although he was a ghost he looked scarily

solid. He was burly and bald. His big hands were crushing the skinny woman's wrists. They would be left thin as string if he

ever let go.

Manda couldn't help but feel butterflies in her stomach. There was such a look in his eyes as he bore down on his captive.

The woman bowed her head. 'You carry on like this, you'll be back inside.'

'You want that, don't you?' yelled the man. He shook her like a doll. No, not like a dol , that wasn't true. Like he knew very wel

she was real, and that she Could break.

But Manda knew the woman wasn't real. Not any more. You couldn't harm

ats; whatever hurt they'd known had happened long before. And that's al were, these people in her domicile. No one real

besides her had ever set foot here, not in two years. She was quite calm about the whole deal now She rubbed her

teyes, looked up and the couple had gone. The domicile was quiet and empty as usual.

With a tired grunt of satisfaction, Manda walked through to her kitchen and

punched up a decaf from the dispenser. Less caffeine. She had to start sleeping better.

She thought caffeine was probably another thing that made her see ghosts.

Eight-thirty am. It was time to start work. So Manda rose from the couch where the dead people had been fighting

and took her seat in front of the Tri-V screen. The chair moulded itself to the contours of her lower back. It was important to

look after your back in sedentary occupations.

22

She logged into the Buildworth server. A list of unopened emails blinked into being, bold and black as the ghost

woman's slit eye.

Delivery confirmations. Fresh orders placed, and quite a lot of them too. Complaints — materials gone astray. Incorrect

deliveries. She would have to put a further rocket up the dispatch depot. She would point out that such gross

inefficiency could cost Buildworth a good deal. She wouldn't tolerate this sloppiness creeping in. She would say so; she

would write it in capitals like she was shouting.

Manda closed her eyes. Caught a glimpse of the big ghost man from this morning raising his fist to hit her.

She gasped, looked around quickly. No one there.

Her coffee cup was empty. She felt hot, though the thermostat was set just how she liked it. Perhaps she was coming

down with something. She needed her medicine, whatever it made her see. But she would clear a few of these emails first.

She was a Senior Logistics Controller with responsibilities. Her junior assistant would be waiting to be briefed on the

day's targets as usual.

Manda wondered whether she might one day meet her junior assistant.

At noon she cautiously ventured into the communal area.

Her front door gave on to a smart hall with a polished pink floor. It reminded her of school, and that was quite

nice. She remembered running round with other girls. In her mind now, they all had blonde pigtails like she had (her

hair had been so long in those days), and wide china smiles. Her one big leg and one little leg hadn't mattered so much

back then

The hall was quiet and empty, and she limped quickly down the stairs to the mailroom. Part of the benefits package at

Buildworth was a subscription to Real Mail. Should anyone ever send her something, it would be delivered here. Her

mother sent her gifts at Christmas, and it meant all the world: getting real post, something she could hold and shake and

not just see on a screen.

Of course, everyone else in the domicile block was a Buildworth employee too, with the same privileges. The ones who

were bothered came to check their real mail too, but not so often as she did. Most of them went first thing in the

morning, or after work in the evening. Usually at noon, she could slip down, discover for certain that her mailbox was

empty (and so stop wondering what might be there for another day), and flit back upstairs

without meeting a soul. Without feeling their eyes on her leg. Without having to look down or away or murmur some

pleasantry as she passed. Or worse, Dying to speak but saying nothing at all.

She cursed under her breath. Today someone was standing in the mailroom. He was short, no taller than she was. His

hair was dark and swept back from his forehead. He wore a dark brown jacket with a short, patterned 'calf: He had an air of

mild concern about him; perhaps he had been expecting something to come.

She backed quietly away. But he noticed her.

He smiled in greeting, a fetching, daft sort of smile.

She turned and walked away.

'Awkward, this time of day, isn't it?' the man called after her. (He had an accent of some kind. She couldn't place it.) Not

sure whether to say good Morning or afternoon.'

Manda climbed the smooth, polished pink stairs quickly. She pressed the PAN in place and the door opened silently. She

closed it firmly. Her cheeks felt burning red. He had talked at her.. *shouted* at her!

She should've just ignored him. Checked for her real mail regardless. She bad every right. He'd have soon stopped talking

when she ignored him. Like

v the ghosts. They always stopped if you just stayed quiet and made out it was Nothing.

Then she heard the sound of a slap and a boy shriek with pain. It came from 1, the living room. She froze, closed her eyes.

0 'Don't do it again!' a woman hollered. Her voice was hoarse and trembling. The boy started sobbing. Painful, last-air-in-

your-lungs sort of sobs. It sounded like he was trying to find enough breath to let out a wail.

Then the domicile fell silent again.

Manda cautiously turned.

A big broad woman was up close right behind her in the hall, holding a leather belt. Her eyes were hard and blue in her

doughy face, looking through Manda like she was transparent.

24

23

'You make Mummy do these things,' shouted the woman. 'Do you Understand? You bring it on yourself.'

Manda backed away, turned her back on the phantom and walked very saintly into her bedroom. She didn't see, but it

sounded like the boy was in litre too. She lay on the bed and scrunched up her eyes, but she could still hear him. It sounded like

he was crouching beside the bed, or in the wall, with his sniffing and sobbing.

Then the noise cut off, and Manda's ears ached with the silence.

She wondered why she wasn't more scared. Perhaps she was getting ill. But „the was still keeping up with her work, so why

worry? Things would get better in time. She'd always told herself that, and six times out of ten she was right. 4

* * *

She heated up some lunch and worked through the afternoon. Log on, slog on. No ghosts disturbed her. There was a

junior management meeting at five, and she hoped they would stay away for that She carefully combed her hair for the

vidcam, and smeared her red cheeks with concealer.

The meeting went on for an hour. The slow minutes scratched their backs against her jangling nerves. She knew she

was pushing her luck. But even distracted so, she could deal with all the inquiries from the little boxes of people dotting

her screen. At six, she disconnected and work was over.

Still no ghosts.

She crossed to the couch and sat and thought about the small, grave-looking man who'd spoken to her in the

mailroom. Which room in the domicile block was his, she wondered. He might be just above her. He might be opposite.

She knew he wasn't beneath her. Kenny was beneath her.

Manda liked to think of Kenny. She had glimpsed him more than a dozen times since Buildworth had allocated her

living space here. She knew his name because she had heard a visitor greet him once. And she had grown to know the

sounds he made as he got on with his life in the rooms below. They were a comfort, when the lonely moods settled over

her.

She could hear him now, taking delivery of some groceries. It reminded her she was running low on most of her

regulars. She could go out to the shops, but it was so much effort and, besides, it looked like rain. She crossed to the

screen and logged on to the store. It already knew her weekly preferences. It made a desultory effort to entice her into

enriching her basic order, but she clicked straight to the checkout.

It was so quick and convenient, and you didn't have to meet a soul.

Around seven-thirty, the thought struck her: if she could hear Kenny moving about downstairs, could he hear her

phantoms, acting out their loud little dramas? What must he think of her

She blushed. What was she thinking? The ghosts weren't real, they were in her mind. No one else could hear them, least

of all Kenny.

Manda half-expected the phone to ring. Her mother had said she might call this week. Perhaps tonight would be the

night. Or perhaps not enough had happened to her mother in the last month to warrant a call.

Sitting on her couch, she wondered if she should tell her mother about the ghosts. No, she decided. Best not to. Mother

would worry. Or else laugh. She didn't want to know which.

Surely it was warmer in here tonight? She kept looking uneasily around the room, but no one and nothing was there.

At ten, she entered her chat room. 'Chat room' was a funny name for it,

because it wasn't a room at all. It was boundless. There were no confines. It

was a place to be free. Manda drifted into the wallpaper where *the* ghosts hid

and let VIKKI type for her. VIKKI's potential was boundless. There was a lot of hope for VIKKI.

She soon hooked up with SIMON. He often sought her out. VIKKI was a little taller than him, and striking rather than

beautiful. Her hair spilled down almost to her waist, swirling and fair like a mermaid's. Her face was oval, her wide eyes

dark, her nose was a neat line.

SIMON greeted her and smiled. He looked a little like she imagined Kenny to be.

(In the wallpaper, Manda wondered distantly if Kenny was here with her. Letting go of himself. Lending himself to

someone better. She couldn't hear him moving about below, so drifted down through the floor to see. Was this sally her

or were the ghosts helping her? She didn't know. It didn't seem Important.)

(Yes, of course. He was sat at his screen, watching VIKKI with her beautiful dark eyes.)

VIKKI's full pink lips were pursed around the beginnings of her usual

k

question.

—did you miss me?

—i have something for you

a love gift?

—

> SIMON is *giving you* a stick

4 a stick?

—

(Manda felt a hot prickling in her skin. She had to get back up to her room before she became solid. Before she became

trapped in Kenny's domicile, in lust her dressing gown.)

l —it is yours

—it isnt mine

SIMON was looking shiftily down at his shoes.

(Manda tried to see what sort of a stick it was but the flowers in the Wallpaper were tickling her eyes.)

—have it anyway

Manda cried out as the boom shook through her. She was back in her chair, and someone was knocking on her door.

Someone was outside.

She switched off the monitor, like a guilty child caught out. SIMON would be hurt, perhaps.

SIMON was an asshole.

Manda hesitated, then got up and crept quietly to the door. There

was a small glass eye in the wood. She borrowed it

to see out into the hall.

No one seemed to be there.

t. But, unannounced, a piece of paper had slipped under her door. It was brilliant white and folded in three. Breathless,

she stooped to take it.

It was a message, unsigned.

to What if i told you the *ghosts were real?* it said.

II

Manda's bed was lumpy and cold. Normally she didn't notice, but tonight she noticed everything. It was like the note had

made everything real.

She jumped with each thump and click of the cooling domicile.

She heard wind in the trees outside. Now and then certain choosy gusts scattered rain over the windows.

She felt herself blink too often as she stared into the darkness.

With the morning she heard the hiss of her boiler, taking the chill off the water. Watched the sun spread a fat orange

glow through her curtains. Saw a small spider ball itself up in a corner.

These things registered, but Manda could only think about the ghosts. Someone else knew about them, and that she

had seen them. That they were real.

But this morning they did not come. It was as if now they had a life outside of her head, they could shun her. They

were performing the echoes of their arguments someplace else.

Who for? How many people did Buildworth house here? Forty? Fifty?

When she first got the job it was such a struggle. She had to work harder and longer hours than anyone she knew

just to keep her head above water. You'll *do.* A *leg like that was* built for treading water, her mother had teased.

She had less time for Mother now, which was a relief. To get on, you had to truly give yourself to the company:

everyone knew that.

Anyway, it had made sense to come here to the sponsored domiciles. It was good for people like her. People who found

it a little harder to keep up. People who knew they could shine if they were only allowed to reach their full potential.

Buildworth recognised potential. And they rewarded dedication. It was a two-way street. You gave them your life.

They gave you your career. The two were inseparable.

A career was just like life, but without all the mess.

Manda waited half in dread, half-hopeful for the ghosts to tramp through her spotless domicile.

She still held the note, scrunched up like a snowball in her cold hand.

She went through the motions at her quiet workplace. Two more complaints about misplaced deliveries. She had

already used capitals on the depot manager. What was left to her?

Call him up.

Or call in on the depot. Use her initiative. Take the train across town. Open his door. Charge up to him.

Shout in his face.

She would blacken his eye, grip his wrists. Squeeze them tight in her cold

hands. He would scream and shout and cry but she would go on squeezing. And when she let go his wrists would be left like

wrung-out cloths, his hands flopping about on the ends like oversized gloves.

Manda spent many minutes thinking about it in the chair that was so good for her back, looking out the window. She saw the

endless plastic trees and concrete walkways that led to the main drag. Above them, the white sky hogged the window, bright

and boundless. No one tired of talking of the way the world had been getting smaller for decades. How was it still so big?

It was such a long way to the rail terminal.

Anyway, she wouldn't know how to fill in the expenses sheet.

She felt a smidgen of self-disgust and decided to go to the mailroom. Like she meant to yesterday. The little grave man

wouldn't be there to stop her now

He was there.

Her chest tightened but she didn't run. He had his back to her.

She hovered outside and watched. He didn't seem to be doing anything. Just Standing there. He wasn't blocking the way to her

mailbox. He might not even turn round. And her skirt was long and dark. You couldn't see she had one leg 'bigger than the other.

Boldly, she stepped into the room.

Something yanked inside her. There was a parcel in her mailbox.

She removed it slowly, reverently. It was not well wrapped. Holes had been Ism in the thick plastic envelope. There was no

frank above the address, Which she barely recognised as her own.

Manda took a deep, quiet breath and walked awkwardly out of the room with fizzing, Christmas excitement.

First a note, then a parcel.

She thought the little grave man might have something to do with the note. What if he'd sent the parcel too? What if it was just

some joke? No, she didn't want to spoil things by thinking that way.

This was a gift.

Once safely back inside, she rushed to the bathroom and poured cold water on her wrists, trying to calm herself. Then she

carefully opened the envelope on her bed. She took her time with it. She wanted to savour this.

A guilt twinge. She should be at her desk, preparing figures. A textmeeting ,with region five accounts was scheduled for

twelve-thirty.

She reached into the envelope to discover her gift.

Her hand closed on something wet and warm.

Manda recoiled and she dropped the envelope to the bedroom floor.

It didn't move, of course, but she watched it like she thought it might. She looked at her hand. It was dry

Holding her breath, she took the unopened end of the envelope and gently k it.

Something twisted and dark fell out soundlessly.

It looked like a stick.

Manda felt baffled and numb. She remembered asshole SIMON fooling around with her last night. SIMON *is giving*

you a stick. It is yours.

Her head was spinning. An anonymous note from a stranger, now

this thing... SIMON wasn't real. She'd left her

brains in the wallpaper when she'd started to type last night, or down between her floor and Kenny's ceiling...

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No sound floated up from downstairs.

Slowly, still disbelieving, Manda reached out a hand to touch the stick again. Recoiled. Warm and wet again, when it

looked so dry.

Manda hurried to the kitchen to grab a towel. She would throw it away, but she didn't want to touch it with bare skin.

When she came back to the bedroom, the stick was gone.

The world seemed to tilt. She looked around. The envelope was still there, and the knife. No stick.

She remembered hunting spiders for her mother when she was a little girl. Mother couldn't rest if she saw a spider and

then lost sight of it. Knowing it was there somewhere. Ready to creep out on its papery legs the moment you stopped

watching for it. Now she felt old like her mother. She wished she could scream for someone to find the spider and take

it away.

She backed out of the bedroom and shut the door. Shut the stick inside, wherever it was hiding. Went on wobbling legs

to the living room to sit down.

Two men with short hair were standing in the couch. One was black, in flecked grey trousers and a collarless shirt.

The other was dressed in faded denim with a bootlace tie.

Ìt didn't mean a thing,' he said.

`Sex with you never does,' the black man answered.

Manda froze. She felt bile rising in her throat. Everything was real. All the stuff in her head, it was out and loose

somehow.

Ìt was nothing.' The denim man stared at his friend, his eyes wide and dark with hurt. There was nothing unreal

about him. His image was sharp and bright. He would leave leg holes behind in her couch cushions. 'Nothing.'

`You just chucked away two years,' screamed the black man. 'We said it would just be us. We didn't need anyone

else.'

Denim turned away. 'I just felt trapped.'

`Well, you're a free man, now.' The black man shoved him out of the couch and through her workstation. 'Happy? Are

you happy now? Well?'

Denim didn't retaliate. He let his friend keep pushing him.

Manda felt that these men were more real than she was. The domicile seemed so small, cramped with these big

feelings, these big actions pressing against the walls and ceiling.

And there were voices coming from her bedroom. Dazed and hot-faced, she opened the door.

The grave little fellow from the mailroom was inside with a gangly young

man.

'It's grown old now, Kenny,' said the little man. 'There's so little of it

left. It's taken souvenirs of the people it drank from and it's crawled away to

rest. Here, in a place free of conflict and interaction. Where nothing can tempt

ft

it to gorge further. Where it can relive past glories.'

'I don't believe you,' said Kenny, huskily. Manda had never seen him up

close. He wasn't as she'd imagined. His face was long and thin and he had a

walleye. 'Please leave.'

The grave man shook his head. 'Are all of you people so afraid?'

1/4 'Get out of my domicile, Doctor whoever-you-are!' snapped Kenny. He was

sweating and rubbing his hands together. He seemed nervous and afraid, out

of his depth. Manda felt he looked real enough to touch. But as she tentatively

reached out a hand, her fingers tingled with the wet warmth of the stick-

thing on the ground. She thrust both hands in her pockets.

'You are being exploited by the company you work for,' stated the Doctor.

He'd produced an umbrella from somewhere and now advanced on Kenny,

holding it out *like* a sword. 'You're opting out of the nick and muck of being

human to be tiny cogs in a grey, grey machine instead. Well, it's your choice —

I'm sure Buildworth didn't force you to sign on the dotted line. But if this

thing of which I speak is allowed to rest and recover. . then you'll learn what

exploitation is.'

'Get — get out of here,' stammered Kenny.

The Doctor cocked his head and smiled faintly. 'I can't hear you.'

'Get out!' Kenny screamed, knocking aside the point of the umbrella.

'This is my home!'

'This is your hiding place,' shouted the Doctor. 'And you are sharing it with

something else.' He shook his head sadly. 'All these people around you. . So

many helping hands. You shy away from them. And yet when this ancient,

sticky tendril reaches for you, you embrace it.'

Kenny slumped. 'I only want to be left alone.'

'So does the thing that's hiding here,' whispered the Doctor. 'The narrow

little lives you all lead here soothe it. It's binged on dramas and conflicts all its

long life to the point of collapse. But if it stays here it may recover. And I'm

sorry, Kenny, I can't allow that.'

He took a step closer, removed a small packet from his pocket. Manda's

mouth went dry. It was like the envelope she'd received.

The two of them blinked out of existence as the men in the living room burst through her. Denim was angry now.

He'd been pushed enough. He was rounding on the black man, who was huffing away.

Ì've so had it with this shit,' shouted Denim. He sounded like he

was trying to convince himself. 'All this

melodrama, all your controlling. All your holding me back...'

He seemed to be lost for what he might go on to say. Instead he stormed back out of the bedroom. He walked

straight through her and out the other side.

The black man pulled a small knife from his pocket and ran screaming straight for Manda. She shrieked and threw

herself out of his path, fell heavily on the floor.

She lay a moment, stunned. Caught movement at the side of her eye.

The stick thing twitched under the bed and rolled like a large pencil towards her.

Manda gasped, rolled away, scrambled up, threw herself at the doorway. Her head thunked into the door, knocking

her senseless. She stared wildly behind her but her vision was blurred. She fell into the hall. She didn't know where the

men had gone, didn't know what had happened to them. Her ears were ringing and she scrabbled for the lock on her

door.

She fell out into the pink hallway. She could only see through one eye, but could tell that someone was standing over

her. A man. Watching.

One eye was frowning at her, the other was fixed on the large arch window at the back of the hall, staring out the

white sky.

`Kenny,' she hissed.

`He told me.' Kenny hovered over her, uncertain what he should do. 'The Doctor said we would have to be the start of

it.'

She let him help her up and lead her down the stairs.

That evening she was still there, in his domicile. One of her eyes was thick and purple. A fat eye to match her fat leg. She

hugged herself on the floor, rocking back and forth. She was disconcerted when he looked at her, all uncertain and concerned.

But at least with his bad eye on the wall or whatever, it was like she didn't have all his attention. That was a little more

bearable.

`You must tell your overseer that you're sick,' Kenny murmured. 'That you need some time off to get better. That's

what you must do.'

Ì know,' she said. Her mouth was so dry. 'But things build up so quickly. I missed a meeting today, and my junior

assistant wasn't briefed. If I'm not there tomorrow, things Well, they'll just slide away without me.'

The sun was sliding away too, through the window, the plastic foliage never slowing it for a second.

Ìt's not good,' agreed Kenny. 'But you won't be the only one. The Doctor has been talking to others.'

Òthers?'

Ìn the domicile block. There are forty-three of us.'

'I didn't know.'

`Nor did I. He told me.'

It was hopelessly weird, being in someone else's domicile. Being with someone else, seeing them for real. Only the

two of them in the room, but her head crowded with fears and forebodings.

She swallowed. 'That thing is up there still,' she whispered,

rocking herself again. 'I think it will be waiting for me.'

Ì shut mine in a cupboard in the kitchen,' said Kenny.

Manda gave a start. 'There's another one in here?'

Ìt's shrivelling up already,' said Kenny. 'The Doctor said it would. Just you and me being here and being so scared. It

can't deal with it.'

0 'I can't deal with it,' said Manda.

`We have to,' said Kenny softly. 'The Doctor's sent one of them to just about all of us. And I have to go visiting.'

She stared at him, frightened and baffled.

He nodded and sighed. 'To make sure we start talking. Start sharing our fears and that.'

Manda looked away, sulkily. 'That's private stuff.'

Ì know.' Kenny looked downcast.

`Who does this Doctor think he is, anyhow?' she asked.

'I don't think he thinks anything.' Kenny shrugged. 'He just knows.' They sat, wondering what to say next.

`He told me it would get easier,' said Kenny gloomily. 'You know, as we got to know each other. Us and the others in

our block. To begin with.'

`How many are there?' Manda whispered.

Kenny shuddered. 'Six.'

Neither of them spoke for a while. Manda watched Kenny through her good eye, furtively comparing him to SIMON,

that itchy speck in her mind's eye. SIMON. All in capitals, he was like a shout, but Manda realised she had never so

much as whispered his name aloud.

Now here was Kenny looking at Manda's outside self, small and

feeble and battered about. She felt silly and exposed, all

defences down. Some reckless inch of her wished she could show him the woman she might've been, to stifle her little

sighs with the self-assured shout of a VIKKI.

And yet she couldn't help but think he might know already. She wondered if he might have seen her, hiding in the

walls so as not to hold back her reinvention. If his ghostly fingers had ever brushed uncertainly against hers, even as

she typed the next self-assured line.

He suddenly seemed to notice the cup of tea he had made himself 'Would you like one?' he asked awkwardly.

Manda nodded. Then she took a deep breath.

Will you come with me to my domicile? While I tell my overseer?' she asked.

Slowly, he nodded. 'All right.'

Ònly I don't know where the stick thing is.'

`We could look for it together.' He paused. 'Maybe one of the others will help us. One of the people upstairs.'

`Maybe.' She shivered. 'If we can't find it quickly.'

She knew that they hid well, things like that. Like the spiders, they would only come out when you dropped your guard.

But they were just scary. They couldn't hurt you. Not really.

Ì suppose we should start looking,' said Kenny.

Thinking Warrior

Huw Wilkins

The first shot comes without warning, an arrow-straight bolt of red lightning on the Flashpoint overlay. The target, a

young man now designated Casualty by the tactical system, drops

without a sound.

I chamber a smoke round and fire it up into the air to obscure the sniper's view, then sweep the blank-fronted tower

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block with the microwave radar.

The gunman is moving, running down a corridor heading for the stairwell. I lock on with the main 10mm co-axial

and fire a short burst of a/p through the wall. He goes down hard.

`Crowd control,' I send over the secure link to Castor. 'Get the civilians into cover. There's probably more where he

came from.'

I hear the boom of Castor's amplified voice almost immediately instructing people to run for the protection of the

hospital's white stucco walls. He repeats the message in Portuguese then Crioulo.

`Technical crossing Estrada,' Castor says over the link. 'Engaging left.'

I send a sensor sweep down that flank and pick up the ragged Dodge pick-

up with an Israeli microcalibre support weapon lashed onto the flatbed.

Castor opens up and shreds it from end to end before they *even get* a shot off. I pop more smoke overhead to guard us

from any more fire coming down

from the concrete housing blocks opposite.

A bullet strikes my armour and ricochets away with a shrill whirr. I scan back down its path and pick out a loose

group of figures advancing from behind the barricades at the base of the Cathédrale. A few civilians are huddling

in the building's doorway; a mother shelters her child with her body as the rebel militiamen run past.

`Troops rounding the Cathodrale,' I send to Castor. 'Engaging right.'

The ammunition feeds across the back of my chassis click over as I switch from armour-piercing to frangible rounds.

One by one I begin picking off the gunmen, directing fire away from the civilians.

A second stream of bright tracers crosses mine, jacketed bullets punching through the fragile barricades and the

Cathedrale walls with equal ease. I see

1 the people sheltering in the doorway vanish in a maelstrom of dust, shattered stonework and blood.

Castor.

`Jesus!' I scream over the link. 'Switch to frangible! Non-corns in your line of fire! Non-coms in your line of fire!'

`What? What?' he sends.

Àdjust your fire. There's civilians in that group!'

`L.' Castor says but the link cuts dead before he finishes.

A tenth of a second later the concussion hits me and I see Castor's wrecked chassis tumble along the ground in a mass of

flames. A second RPG slices through the smoke looking for me.

My engine screams at the rev limiter as I surge forward out of the way, my tracks kicking up twin plumes of dust. I

probe back along the road and find the rebel soldier still fitting a new warhead to the launch tube.

I return fire through the haze and the wall of the building he's using for cover. The impact of the bullets throws him

out into the street in a mess of tangled limbs.

`Dammit,' Castor sends over the secondary link. 'I'm dead. Damnit.' `You weren't covering your flank,' I reply.

Ì_ I know,' he sends, his tone a contrite mixture of embarrassment and apology. 'This would never have happened in

version eleven.'

Ì'll finish this up then we can run a simpler simulation to settle you in.' Òkay. Good. Okay. We... we... ww...'

His speech tails off into a high-pitched garble of random sounds. `Castor? Are you all right?' I send. 'I'll beep

Marti.'

I try to hook into the lab's communications system but get no response. The frame rate of the world gets choppy

and a brief burst of rain sweeps out of a clear sky.

`Castor?' I send again with more urgency 'Are you there? Something's happening to the system.'

Then everything goes black and silent as the universe crashes around me.

`Go right in, sir,' the secretary said, waving towards the door with his free hand. 'Ms Carthy is expecting you. Would

you like coffee or tea sent in?' Ordell paused for a moment. 'Is Julia having any?'

`She and her guest ordered some coffee, yes.'

Òkay, then,' Orde 3435

ll said. 'I'll have coffee, please.'

Òn its way,' the secretary said with a nod, already keying the request into his desk computer.

Ordell gave him a brief, polite smile and opened the door. The office on the other side was large and well furnished,

with a wide desk of pale wood that reflected the light from a broad set of windows onto a wall full of certificates, photographs

and awards.

`Simon,' said a tall woman, rising from her seat behind the desk. About fifty years old, she was dressed in the severe

corporate style inherited from America. Her suit was a dark collection ofdiscreet pinstripe and sharp creases that

contrasted strongly with the carefully arranged blonde wave of her hair.

`Glad you could make it so quickly.' She held out her hand.

`No problem, Julia,' Ordell said. He stepped inside and took her hand,

squeezing it in a momentary shake. He glanced at a second figure seated beside the desk.

`This is David Gordon,' Carthy said, indicating the man. 'He's with Perseus Corporation's central security office.'

Gordon stood and offered his hand. 'Please to meet you, Major,' he said with a winning smile as Ordell shook his

hand. He was dressed in a conservative business suit that failed to hide the fact he was fitter and more muscular than

the average executive.

Ordell said. Carthy nodded to a spare chair and he sat down. 'So,' he said. 'I gather there's been some

trouble overnight?'

Carthy nodded and sat down again. She brushed a speck of fluff from the sleeve of her jacket with a sigh of irritation.

'That would be something of an understatement,' she said.

'Hackers managed to get a connection into the AI lab during the night,' Gordon said. 'They wiped the GridEngine

and pretty much anything else they could get their hands on.'

Ordell raised his eyebrows. 'How the hell did they manage that? I thought we were supposed to have a secure

network here?'

`Not secure enough, apparently,' Carthy said, looking pointedly at Gordon. Gordon sighed and held up his hands. 'I

know, I know,' he said. 'We've got people reviewing the last security audit at the moment.'

Ordell rubbed his chin and grimaced. 'How long will this set us back?' he asked.

'We don't know yet. Marti's got the latest backups back from storage and he's working on getting the GridEngine

up and running again. His best guess was up to a week to get Castor and the simulations back on line at full capacity,

then a few days more to catch up the work lost between back-ups. So, lay two weeks until we're back where we were

yesterday,' Carthy said.

'Well, I guess that could be worse,' Ordell said, relief evident in his voice. 'So it's still not out of the question to

deliver by the end of the year then?'

Carthy pursed her lips. 'I don't know. All of the project staff have been suspended until Mr Gordon here can

reassure himself they weren't involved,' she said, a hint of annoyance breaking through her urbane control.

`Don't worry too much about that, Julia,' Gordon said reassuringly. 'It's just a standard part of the investigation

procedure in cases like these. We should be done with that process before your systems are back running again.

Statistically speaking, nearly eighty per cent of data thefts are inside jobs, so we can't ignore the possibility.'

Ordell glanced sharply at Gordon. 'You didn't mention them stealing our data.'

'We haven't confirmed that they even tried to steal anything yet,' Carthy said.

Ìt's the most obvious motive though, you must agree,' Gordon replied.

'Despite its evident shortcomings our network security really is the best

money can buy; the time and effort required to compromise it suggests the perpetrators had a good reason for doing

so.'

Ìt could have been an attempt by Grumman or Lockheed to set us back,' Ordell said. The board's... amendments to

the specification have delayed delivery so many times, it's common knowledge our CMO contract is under review.

Maybe a competitor thought they might be able to tip it in their favour if our deadlines slipped again.'

Gordon nodded, but looked doubtful. 'We're not ruling it out, of course, but once you're in, why not take what you

can rather than just trashing the mainframe?' He sighed and shrugged almost imperceptibly. 'Either way one or other

of the American arms manufacturers is most likely behind it.'

Ì guess that's true,' Ordell said, acknowledging the point with a nod.

A knock sounded at the door. It opened a moment later and Carthy's secretary entered carefully carrying a tray

with both hands.

Òh, thank you, Martin,' Carthy said. She stood up and bent over her desk to push papers out of the way to clear a

space. 'Just here, please,' she said, tapping the bare patch of wood she had uncovered.

He set the tray down in the space indicated. 'Your guest has cleared security on the ground floor,' he said,

straightening up. 'He's being escorted up now.'

Àh, good,' Carthy said. 'Make him comfortable when he gets up here, could you? We'll be out in a few minutes.'

`No problem,' the secretary said. He turned and left, shutting the door behind himself with barely a click.

À guest? Today?' Ordell asked, surprised.

Carthy shook her head. 'Not by choice, I assure you,' she said. She picked up the coffee pot from the tray and

poured three cupfuls.

`He's a CMO investigator,' Gordon said, pronouncing the acronym as one word: *see-mo.* He picked up one of the

small cups and dropped three rough lumps of brown sugar into it one after the other.

`That's... awfully fast of them,' Ordell said. He took one of the remaining cups and sipped from it, not bothering

with sweetener or cream.

`More than you know,' Carthy said with a rueful chuckle. 'He called me at ten past five this morning. Only fifteen

minutes after the call from security woke me. Got me out of the shower, too.'

`News travels fast,' Ordell said, pulling an exaggerated expression of surprise.

`We're looking into that, too,' Gordon said.

Ì'll bet you are.'

`CMO's sending us a message,' Carthy said. 'They had someone ready and waiting for something to go wrong. They

want to make sure we know the pressure's on.'

Ì think we can say that it's been received,' Ordell said. `Do you think he's a for-real investigator, or just for show?'

Ì haven't been able to find out much about him, so far,' Gordon said. 'It doesn't help that he insists on just going by

his title rather than giving us a name. We'll know more in a few hours once we've been able to shake a few trees at the

UN.'

`There's something odd about him, for sure,' Carthy said. 'He doesn't carry a PAN, for one thing. The security guys

were having to issue him with an honest-to-God swipe card when I brought him in.'

Ì'm amazed those rentacops could work the machine,' Ordell said dismissively.

`They couldn't,' Carthy said, shooting another glance at Gordon. 'I think he's used to it though, he was showing

them how to use it when I left.'

`We do train them on those as well,' Gordon objected. 'It just doesn't come up very often.'

Ordell shrugged. 'What're you going to do with him?' he asked Carthy.

Ì'd like you to look after him for a couple of days, Simon. You and Marti are the only members of the project team not

on suspension, and Marti has his hands full right now.'

`Me? I'm not sure...' Ordell stuttered.

Ìt's just temporary. I'm going to be busy for a day or two smoothing ruffled feathers — half the board has called me

this morning already. Besides, you're an external advisor appointed through the UN, rather like he is. It might

present a more open face than a Perseus employee could.'

Òkay, then,' Ordell said, slightly doubtfully. 'How do you want

me to handle him?'

Carthy shook her head. 'Don't try to "handle" him. I'm sure he'll be expecting that. Just show him around,

answer all his questions and keep an eye on him. Our contract with CMO allows him access to any information

concerning the Peacekeeper project, so you can take him down to the lab but keep him away from the other project

areas, okay?'

`Fine.'

`He may ask about the Flashpoint countersniper system,' Gordon said. 'That's a bit of a legal grey area, so refer it

back to me or Julia if it comes up.' `Do you think that's likely?'

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`Not sure, but I want to limit the number of projects we have to open up to scrutiny. You know how stuff leaks from UN

offices,' Gordon said, raising an eyebrow at Ordell.

Ordell frowned. 'Thanks for reminding me,' he said and shot a deeply insincere smile back at the security man.

`Sony,' Gordon said and held up a hand in a gesture of supplication. 'I didn't mean anything by that.'

Ànd don't mention anything about those amendments to the specification,' Carthy said. 'That's still

privileged information that affects other projects CMO doesn't have a legal right to know about.'

Ì know, okay? You've explained that enough times before; I know,' Ordell said, gesturing irritably with his hands.

`He should be here by now,' Carthy said. `Martin will show you where he is.'

Ordell glanced at Gordon and held eye contact just a few seconds longer than was comfortable, then stood and

nodded to Carthy. go make a start then.'

`Good. I'll block out some time for lunch,' Carthy said. `Bring him up to the restaurant at about one o'clock.'

Ì will. See you then,' Ordell said. 'Pleasure meeting you, Mr Gordon.' `Likewise, Major,' Gordon said, toasting him

with his coffee.

Ordell turned smartly and left.

Carthy felt the tension rise in the room as the door closed behind Ordell. Gordon was tapping his fingers lightly on the

desk as he watched him go. `You're sure?' he asked, still looking at the door.

`Yes,' Carthy said. `He'll back Perseus all the way; he knows which side his bread's buttered.'

`Good enough,' Gordon said, nodding slowly.

Carthy's secretary, Martin, showed Ordell down the corridor to the open space around the stairwell that was set out as an

informal meeting area and waiting room. A broad light well ran down one side of the room and the day's grey weather

gave the light a gritty texture as it mixed with the overhead fluorescents.

A tall man with long hair that brushed the top of his unfashionably high collar was sitting on a low, padded bench,

sipping tea from a cup bearing the winged sword logo of Perseus Dynamics. He was leafing though a glossy brochure one

handed, seemingly engrossed by its content. A slim line of jagged scar tissue was visible on the inside of his wrist

where it emerged from the cuff of his sharply tailored green coat.

`Doctor?' Martin asked, walking up with Ordell.

Òh, yes?' the man said, jumping slightly in surprise.

`This is Major Simon Ordell, the military advisor on the Peacekeeper project,' Martin said, indicating Ordell.

`Doctor,' Ordell said, holding out a hand.

The Doctor stood and hesitated for a moment as he realised both hands were full. He tucked the brochure under his

arm and shook Ordell's hand. 'Pleased to meet you, Major,' he said, smiling.

`Simon, please,' Ordell said. He kept the handshake light, and brief. Àlmost everyone here is a civilian, so I don't

have much cause to use my rank.'

`Very well,' the Doctor said, broadening his smile and affecting a minimalist bow.

Ì'll leave you to it,' Martin said. 'You have my extension number if there's anything else I can do for you, Doctor.'

'I do, thank you,' the Doctor said.

Martin nodded to Ordell and walked off back towards his desk outside Carthy's office.

`So,' Ordell said slightly awkwardly. 'What can we do for you, Doctor?'

The Doctor sighed. 'It's just a bit of handholding for Conflict Management Oversight, really. A few of them are a bit jittery over

the delays in the project, and what with last night's problem they wanted the reassurance of their own man on the scene.'

Ordell nodded. 'I see. I know we've slipped a bit on delivery, but it's not like this is a simple project.'

'Oh, I quite agree, Major. Still, you must understand that CMO is under a huge amount of pressure from both Europe and

the US Alliance. Alliance security forces have already threatened to withdraw troops from peacekeeping duties unless something

is done about the casualties in Guinea Bissau.'

'I know. The fighting's been bad in the capital for months now. Twelve members of my regiment were killed just a

fortnight ago,' Ordell said.

`You're in the Royal Marines, aren't you? the Doctor asked.

'Yes, that's right,' Ordell confirmed, nodding. 'Though I've been acting as military advisor to Perseus for nearly two years

now.'

`Good work?'

'Well. . it's different, anyway. Safer than doing a peacekeeping tour, which makes my wife glad. Maybe less rewarding

though, at least in the short term.'

The Doctor nodded. 'The rewards are longer term in this case, but just as worthy, I think.'

'Oh, don't get me wrong, Doctor. I believe in the Peacekeeper project one hundred per cent. I just sometimes feel...' Ordell

hesitated and sighed. 'I don't know. Maybe just a bit out of the loop.'

'Well, with any luck, you'll be back out there making a difference soon.' Ordell nodded slowly, then flashed a brief smile.

'Still, I'm sure you didn't

come here to hear me list my problems for you. I'll spare you the details.' 'No need on my account, Major. I like to think I

help out wherever I can.' 'Well, I think we'd best make sure CMO's happy first.'

'Yes, you're right of course,' the Doctor said. 'What can you tell me about what happened last night?'

'I know the outline of it, but if you want the technical details

you'll need to speak to Math Elser; he's the project's technical

lead.'

'Is Marti in yet?'

'Yes. I understand he's down in the secure lab working on fixing the damage.'

'Fine, fine. Well, maybe we should go down and see him. You can give me the overview on the way.'

'No problem,' Ordell said. He indicated the stairwell. 'This way,' he said. The Doctor took the lead and pushed through

the double fire doors. 'I

prefer the stairs myself,' he said, 'but I'm surprised I haven't seen anyone use the lifts yet.'

Ordell chuckled. 'You haven't been into a Perseus building before then?' `First time, Pm afraid. Is it that obvious?'

'It's some directive from the Perseus board a few years ago. Encouraging fitness in their staff, you see. A fit worker is a

productive worker, or some such crap.'

The Doctor began to descend the broad stairway, strolling easily down the wide steps. 'Seems like a fine idea to me.'

`There's more, of course. If they think you're overweight they load a directive into the computers so it'll only let

you buy healthy snacks and drinks from the vending machines in the basement and the lifts will refuse to work if they

detect your PAN inside.'

The Doctor laughed. 'I imagine that adds a little premium to the black market chocolate around here then.'

`You'd be surprised. By the time you reach the sixth floor, where the computer programmers work, a Coke is

practically worth its weight in gold,' Orden said deadpan.

Ì'll be sure to bear that in mind if I'm a little short,' the Doctor chuckled, his eyes wrinkling with amusement.

Ànyway, last night,' Ordell said, his tone becoming more businesslike. `Yes, go on,' the Doctor said.

Àt about three o'clock someone managed to gain access to the internal network for the Peacekeeper project. The

security guys are working on the details, of course, but I gather there's not a lot left to work with.'

`The crackers covered their tracks?'

`Well, not so much covered as obliterated. Every piece of hardware they could get their hands on was wiped clean.

About the only thing that survived was Pollux, the beta version intelligence core. The biggest loss was the

GridEngine mainframe, of course, but a lot of other bits and pieces, documentation, project plans and the like

were lost as well.'

The Doctor nodded. He ran his hand lightly over the polished wooden banister, fingertips just brushing the surface.

'What was on the mainframe?`

`Well, lots of stuff, but the two main things were Castor, the alpha version neural network simulation, and the

software that runs the virtual realities we use for training and evaluation.'

`So, very much the core of the project then?'

Òh, yeah. Everything ran off the GridEngine. Without that we're pretty much dead in the water.'

Ì see. Is there any evidence of data being copied off the network?'

`Not so far,' Ordell said. 'It's being looked into, but it's difficult to tell what with all the chaos down there.'

The Doctor stepped down onto the ground floor and pushed

through

another set of fire doors into the main atrium of the building. He took a moment to look around, gazing unselfconsciously up

at the high glass ceiling404

1and boxes of trailing plants that spilled over the edges of artfully utilitarian structural members. In the

centre of the floor was a low fountain, tiny inch-high jets of water playing over cracked paving slabs in a shallow indentation.

The back wall of the building was entirely made of glass, a gracefully tiered cascade that descended in storey-high steps until it

reached a low curtain wall at the ground. At the far end, opposite the main entrance, was a wide, open desk with a small crew

of receptionists sitting at sleek terminals. Behind them was a tall chromium sculpture of the winged sword logo ofPerseus

Dynamics.

Closer to the main doors, where no visitor could fail to notice it, was the low, sleek form of the latest model BMW sports

car.

'It's a prize,' Ordell said, noticing the Doctor's gaze. 'They raffle one off every month to employees who've recommended

a new hire.'

'Some prize,' the Doctor said.

'Well, Perseus is pretty aggressive about attracting the right people.' `So it would seem.'

'This way,' Ordell said. He struck out across the polished floor of pale marble. He took the Doctor's arm lightly and

guided him to one side. 'Careful. A lot of first-time visitors are so busy looking at the architecture they walk straight into the

fountain.'

'Really?' the Doctor asked incredulously.

`Well, you were heading right for it just now,' Ordell replied, raising an eyebrow. 'You can always spot the new starters.

Wet ankles, looking for the lifts.'

The Doctor laughed. 'Thanks for sparing me the embarrassment then.'

'Don't mention it, Doctor,' Ordell said, leading them up to a heavy door that was set into a deep arch in the wall. Embedded in

the lintel was a steel panel with a single red light glowing in the middle.

'Er. .' Ordell said doubtfully. 'This usually just detects your PAN and lets you in if you're authorised.' He held up his own PAN

and pressed his thumb into the identification slot. The red light stayed on.

`How about this?' the Doctor said. He fished a slim wafer of plastic out of his pocket and waved it over a discreet black

plastic box set into the side of the arch. The light above the door turned green and there was a loud click as the magnetic locks

disengaged

Ordell peered at the box. 'Never noticed that before,' he said.

Ì've been getting quite used to hunting them out since PANs were introduced,' the Doctor said.

'Good job, too,' Ordell acknowledged. He pushed the heavy door open and held it for the Doctor.

Beyond the door was a short corridor, its bland institutional decor at odds with the grandeur of the atrium. Two guards,

both conspicuously carrying

handguns and TASER weapons in belt holsters, were flanking another security door a few metres further in.

Àll the project labs are down here,' Ordell said, `so we'll have to do a more formal ID before we can go on.'

He walked up to the guards and nodded to them. 'Terry,' he said. 'Dave. How's it going?'

`Same old, same old,' Terry said. 'Step up for identification please, sir.'

Ordell turned to face the blunt muzzle of a steel and plastic device attached to the wall. There was a momentary fan

of bright laser light across his face, collapsing swiftly down to a band across his eyes.

Òkay, you're good to go, sir,' the other guard said as a confirmation popped up on the ruggedised PAN strapped

to his wrist. He turned to the Doctor and politely indicated that he should do the same as Ordell.

`He doesn't have a PAN,' Ordell said, rubbing one eye. 'You'll have to check his patterns against his card.'

The Doctor held up his card expectantly, turning it to show the silver logo embossed on the front.

`Step up to the scanner please, sir,' Terry said, taking the card. He pressed it against the face of his PAN for a

moment, allowing the device to read its contents.

The Doctor walked forward and copied Ordell's action of peering into the scanner. He blinked in surprise as the laser

briefly dazzled him.

`Good match on the iris and retina patterns,' Dave said, consulting his PAN. `You're both clear to go down.' He held out

the Doctor's card.

`Thank you,' the Doctor said, taking it back. He tucked it into an inside pocket of his coat.

`Have a nice day, gentlemen,' Terry said cheerfully as Ordell leaned his weight against the inner security door.

Beyond the door was an open lounge area. A couple of ugly vending machines hunkered in a corner but most of

the space was taken up by a random scatter of low sofas and beanbag chairs. A few people were dotted around the

room, most sitting alone and reading, a few in small groups chatting over coffee. The walls were covered with

large posters, most depicting idyllic outdoor scenes.

`This is the project lounge,' Ordell said. 'It's just here to save everyone having to go through the security

checkpoint all the time.'

The Doctor nodded. 'No windows, I notice, 43

' he said.

`Security again. You're not allowed to take any sensitive materials where they could be seen from an unsecured

area.'

The Doctor squinted at the ceiling, taking in the mismatched clusters of lights recessed into the tiles. 'Good light

though.'

Òh, yeah, they're really proud of that. There's a panel on the wall where you can select environments and it will

replicate the light quality. It's an offshoot

from some of the training and simulation technologies they make here. Gives it a bit more of an outdoorsy feel.'

`Works well,' the Doctor said. It was true that the room didn't have the enclosed feel that its windowless walls should

have engendered. 'Where's this light from?'

Ordell glanced up. 'Alpine meadow, I think. That's the usual favourite.' He pointed to a broad corridor that led off

opposite the door through which they had entered. 'Down here.'

The corridor was equipped only with standard fluorescent tubes and the walls seemed to subliminally close in on

them as they walked down it. Ordell led them around a corner and up to another heavy security door. Set into its lintel

was another steel panel with a glowing red light. He pulled out his PAN and thumbed the ID button.

'There, I think,' he said, pointing to another black card-reader mounted beside the frame. The Doctor pulled out

his card again and pressed it against r the box.

The light turned green and the door vibrated as the locks disengaged. 'Does the whole place use PAN security?' the

Doctor asked as Ordell pushed the heavy door open.

'Pretty much,' he replied. 'It's a good system. Biometric checks at all points. I don't think they'd usually let anyone

use the old card system unless they're a special case.'

The Doctor nodded as he followed Ordell in.

'Okay, here we are,' Ordell said. 'This is the Peacekeeper project lab.'

An island of desks took up the centre of the long room, each one separated from the others by chest-high dividers on

which a mess of shelves, notes, posters and photographs were pinned. Most of the desks had at least two, often more,

expensive computer terminals on them. Beyond this was a set of technical workbenches that backed onto a glass-walled

room that contained an array of tall boxes.

'That's the GridEngine in there,' Ordell said, indicating the glass room. 'Most of the actual work's done out here

though. I'll see if I can find Marti.'

Ordell skirted the desks and walked to the back of the room. He leaned over one of the workbenches and tapped on

the glass with his knuckles. A moment later a short, dark-haired man with a fastidiously trimmed goatee beard

appeared, peering between the twin rows of computer racks. He saw Ordell and waved a greeting. Ordell beckoned for

him to come out.

'Morning, Simon,' the man said as he opened the door of the glass room and exited in a gust of cool, processed air.

'Marti,' Ordell said, nodding. 'This is the Doctor.'

'Pleased to meet you, Dr Elser,' the Doctor said, holding out his hand.

'Oh, hi,' Elser said, a little doubtfully. He gripped the Doctor's hand and gave it a weak squeeze. 'Are you another of

the security guys?'

`No, I'm from CMO,' the Doctor said.

`Didn't you get the email?' Ordell asked.

'No, sorry. I've been in with the GridEngine ever since I arrived.'

Ordell sniffed. 'Doesn't matter. It just said that the Doctor here's a CMO

investigator and that you're to extend every courtesy. The usual drill.' 'CMO checking up on us?' Elser asked,

turning to face the Doctor. `Yes, but I confess it's more for show than anything else. It's just the CMO

board covering themselves. Got to make sure they can say they did their due

diligence, you know,' the Doctor said, his tone one of resigned amusement. `Politics,' Elser said disdainfully.

`That's about the shape of it,' the Doctor said. 'I'll try to keep out of the way as much as possible, have a bit of a poke

around so I can justify my report and leave it at that.'

`Well, there's not much I can tell you at the moment, Doctor,' Elser said. `How's the recovery going?' the Doctor

asked.

Elser glanced at Ordell.

Ìt's okay, Marti. The Doctor's cleared for all the project-specific details.'

`Well,' Elser said, rubbing the back of his neck. 'There's good news and bad news. We haven't really lost much data;

it's all on the backups, but the GridEngine's still refusing to boot fifteen of its nodes.'

`The backups didn't restore them?' Ordell asked.

Elser shrugged. 'We have the data, but this kind of heavy iron doesn't like being shut down like it was last night. I'll

probably have to rebuild those nodes from scratch and just restore the files once they're running.'

`What's your estimate on the setback then?' the Doctor asked.

`Pretty much what I told Julia still. I'll have to put in a few long days, but it's all recoverable.'

The Doctor nodded. 'That doesn't sound too bad then. Would it be possible for me to have access to the files you've

restored so far?'

`Sure,' Elser said. He sat down at one of the terminals and wiggled the mouse to take the screensaver off. 'I'll set

you up with a team login so you can get into the system. You'll be able to get the documents and project plans, but Castor

won't be back up until we have a few more working nodes.'

Ì understand that Pollux wasn't affected by the break in?'

Elser nodded, his eyes still fixed on the screen. 'Yeah. He says they scanned his network connections, but I guess they

couldn't work out what he was so they left him alone.'

`May I talk with him?'

`He's over here,' Ordell said. 'We'll leave you to it for a bit, Marti, okay?' 'Sure,' Elser said.

let you know your

login details in a minute, Doctor,

but then I'll have to be getting back to the GridEngine.'

`Thank you, Marti,' the Doctor said.

Ordell led him over to the corner of the room. Sitting on the workbench was

an angular metal object about the size of a briefcase surrounded by a festoon of wires connecting it to a stack of

computers, test gear and monitors. Just to one side was a dark plastic dome that emitted a quiet mechanical whine.

Opposite that was a wide high-resolution screen showing a dense tangle of lines picked out in a slowly pulsing spectrum

of colours.

'Hello, Pollux. How are you feeling?' Ordell said.

c'I'm fine, thank you, Major. A little shaken after last night still, but

h otherwise unhurt,' said a beautifully modulated androgynous voice from a pair of cheap multimedia speakers hidden

behind the cradle of wires.

'This is the Doctor, an investigator from CMO.'

'Yes, I overheard your conversation with Marti. I'm pleased to

meet you, Doctor.'

'Likewise, I'm sure, Pollux,' the Doctor said. He glanced around the test setup for a moment. 'Can you see me?'

'Very well,' Pollux said. 'I'm hooked up to the sensor dome on the right.' 'Ah, of course,' the Doctor said. He leaned

forward and, shading his eyes, peered into the translucent plastic dome.

'It's a variant of the optical sensor package Dynamics developed for the *milk Apache project. It's got visual

spectrum, infrared, ultraviolet, even microwave radar and laser designators all in one box,' Ordell said. 'It's the main

vision system for the Peacekeepers.'

The Doctor crossed his arms self-consciously. 'Impressive you managed to fit all that in there.'

'Perseus has made some revolutionary breakthroughs in miniaturising this kind of thing,' Ordell said. 'I don't

understand all the details, but it's ten years or more ahead of what Lockheed Martin's trying to push.'

The Doctor looked at the colourful display on the screen again. 'What's this?' he asked.

'It's a diagnostic overview of my neural network,' Pollux said. 'The colours denote different kinds and amounts of

activity. Watch this.'

As soon as the words were spoken a bright crimson bloom spread across the right side of the image. As it grew it split

up into sinuous tentacles that reached right across to the other side of the screen.

'What happened?' the Doctor asked.

'I just activated my fire control systems and recalled one of the battle simulations I've run. It causes a lot of

subsystem processing, so a large part of the diagram turns bright red.'

The Doctor watched the pattern for a minute as it faded gradually back to the even blues and yellows it had expressed

originally. 'It's quite beautiful.' 'Thank you,' said Pollux.

Ordell grinned. 'I know. It's kind of hypnotic, isn't it? I sometimes spend more time watching that than anything else

when we're running simulations,' be confessed.

`Could you spare me a few minutes to talk about last night, Pollux?' the Doctor asked.

Òf course, Doctor,' Pollux said. 'I've nothing much to do at the moment. I can't even chat to Castor until the

GridEngine is back up.'

Ì'll leave you to it for a little while, if you don't mind,' Ordell said. 'I'd like to check what state my files are in.'

`No, go ahead, Major,' the Doctor said.

Òkay. I'll only be over there at my workstation,' Ordell said. 'Shout if you need anything. Talk to you later, Pollux.'

`Goodbye, Major,' Pollux said politely as Ordell walked away.

The Doctor turned and pulled one of the spare chairs over from an empty desk and sat down beside the workbench. He

crossed his arms comfortably across his chest and rested one foot on top of a computer case on the floor.

Ì must admit I was expecting something a little bigger,' the Doctor said, looking at the armoured box amidst the wires.

Ì'm pretty much a solid optical network inside here,' Pollux said. 'It's all custom-built from the ground up, so they

can make it pretty compact. You only need something like the

GridEngine if you want to run the whole system in

simulation.'

`That's what Castor is?'

`Yes. He's the development model. All his hardware is just a virtual model run on the computer. I can't be

modified once my network's been grown.'

The Doctor nodded. 'So, tell me about last night.'

`Marti went home just after eleven o'clock. They'd just booted up a new version of Castor, and that always makes for

a long day. We were chatting over the network, getting to know each other again...'

Ì'm sorry?' the Doctor interrupted. 'What do you mean getting to know each other again?'

`Castor's always a little different in each version. He can access all the memories of the previous versions, but he's

always got a few... it's hard to describe. A new perspective, maybe?' Pollux said uncertainly. A tint of yellow spread along

the centre of the screen like a slow curl of smoke.

Ì see. Which version was he last night?'

`The newest version is 12.3, but I expect he'll be back on version 12.2 when they get him running from the backups

again.'

`Which version are you, if that's not a personal question?'

The speakers emitted a short staccato rattle. 'Sorry,' Pollux said, sounding a little embarrassed. 'My voice

synthesiser's pretty good, but it can't do laughter well. I'm a

The Doctor nodded slowly. 'I didn't realise they were still developing the artificial intelligence core at such a rate.'

'They're always tweaking Castor. Sometimes they version him every couple of days.'

'That must be a little.., well, disorienting for him?'

'Sometimes it is. On a couple of occasions the version wasn't stable, and Castor...' Pollux trailed off.

'Yes?' the Doctor prodded.

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'It's hard to describe if you haven't seen it happen. I gather from the team that it's a bit like a degenerative mental

illness, but much accelerated. He would develop obsessive behaviour, exhibit rapid personality changes, talk gibberish. It

was distressing to witness it.'

'I can imagine,' the Doctor said sympathetically. He glanced at the screen again where the same yellow taint as before

was displacing the calm blue. Was the latest version at all unstable?'

'Not that! noticed,' Pollux said. 'He seemed more tightly focused than the previous version, but not obsessively so. I was

expecting that since the latest version modifications have been on goal selection, but I think his ability to multitask suffered

a bit.'

'What did you do next?'

F 'Castor wanted to run a simulation. We're given freedom to run mission simulations overnight if no other jobs are

running. It all gets logged for analysis, so it's all productive time on the GridEngine they wouldn't otherwise have.'

'Which simulation did you pick?'

'It was an evolving area protection simulation set in central Bissau. We were defending a checkpoint outside the Hôpital

Simâo Mendes from sniper fire and then from a ground assault. Do you want the log code?'

'Not right now, thanks,' the Doctor said. 'How did it go?'

'Not all thatwell. We started clearing the snipers, but Castor got distracted and VMS taken out by an RPG when the FDV

ground troops managed to flank him.' 'How did Castor take that?'

'He didn't sound too happy. It was a stupid mistake. He said he thought he would never have been caught like that in

version eleven. It's always difficult for Castor when they version him I was trying to persuade him to run another aim,

something a little simpler maybe to let him adjust a bit, when it happened.'

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'The attack?'

'Yes. Castor started repeating himself, just the odd word here and there at r first but he just dissolved into random sounds

after a few seconds. I thought It was another unstable version going bad, so I tried to access the alert system to beep Marti, but

I couldn't get a connection to the system. I started to try to connect to other stuff on the network, but it was all crashing around

me.'

On the screen the familiar spread of yellow appeared, but this time thin bars of deep red flanked it on both sides.

`Did they try to attack you?'

À couple of minutes after Castor went down some process on the GridEngine probed my network ports pretty

thoroughly. I think whoever it was thought I was some kind of customised network server and was trying to work out

exactly what I was. I stopped responding to connections and that

seemed to convince them that I'd crashed along with all

the other gear.'

The Doctor stroked his chin thoughtfully, watching the screen. 'What did you do then?'

`There wasn't a lot I could do. I had no way of contacting the outside world, so I just had to sit here and wait until

Marti got in a couple of hours later.' `Must have been boring for you.'

Ì'm used to it. It's the same mixture of boredom and anxiety I get standing at a guard post in the simulations.'

`You do feel anxiety, then?'

Pollux's sensor dome whirred for a moment, then settled back into silence. `Yes,' he said. 'Castor and I are sentient, as

far as the team can tell. We have emotions, but our neural networks have been designed and evolved to deal with that

kind of stress synergistically.'

`Which means?'

The odd rattle sounded from the speakers again. 'You skipped reading the Perseus brochures, I see,' Pollux said.

Àh,' the Doctor said. He smiled embarrassedly at the sensor dome. 'I must confess I did. I've read most of the progress

reports, but they haven't been got at by the marketing department.'

Òur designs have been through millions of test iterations on the GridEngine, looking for configurations that

were emotionally stable. Most of Marti and the team's efforts have actually gone into making the system that evaluates

and tests each iteration of the neural network. They design that system, then that system designs us.'

Ì see,' the Doctor said, nodding slowly.

`How are you two getting on?' Elser asked, appearing suddenly beside the table.

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The Doctor jumped. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I didn't hear you walk up.'

`My fault,' Elser said. 'I was in such a rush this morning that I came out

without my shoes.' He pointed at the threadbare pair of carpet slippers on his

feet.

The Doctor chuckled. Now, that's dedication,' he said.

Gordon peeled back the wrapper on his sandwich and parted the slices of brown bread suspiciously.

`They're really very good, you know,' Carthy said, eyebrow raised. She popped the cap on her bottle of spring water

and took a sip.

`Sorry,' Gordon said, slapping the sandwich back together. 'I spend all my

time going from place to place so I've learned never to trust a staff canteen to Make an edible lunch.'

Carthy laughed. 'Must take it out of you, being suspicious all the time.' 'It's worth the effort for a good

sandwich,' he said, flashing a brief smile. He bit into the bread and nodded approvingly.

Carthy prodded at her salad with a fork, shuffling a few of the lush green leaves around. She eyed the jumble of

chicken, onions and mayonnaise in Gordon's lunch. 'Not going for the healthy option, I see,' she said.

Gordon smiled around the mouthful. 'I leave that to you lifestyle execs,' he Said after he swallowed.

Carthy frowned briefly and forked a pile of leaves into her mouth. They ate In silence for a minute.

Gordon kept glancing at the glass doors, his eyes flicking back and forth as his interest wavered between them and

his lunch. Beyond the doors was a wide balcony that looked out over the atrium and further through the

transparent back wall to the gardens behind Buckingham Palace.

'The Doctor and Ordell should be up soon,' Carthy said.

'It's not that. Phil Green said he was going to meet me here. He wants to take a look at the Doctor.'

Carthy arched an eyebrow. 'I didn't know this had risen so far in the security division.'

Gordon shrugged. 'I gave him a call this morning about finding out some more about the Doctor. He called back

about an hour ago and said he was Coming down.'

'What's he found out?' Carthy asked.

'He didn't give me all the details. He'll fill you in when he gets here,' Gordon mumbled as he swallowed. Àh, here

he is.'

He stood up and raised a hand in the direction of the doors. A tall, blandly handsome man answered the wave and began

picking his way between the tables to where they sat.

'David,' he said, smiling as he approached. 'Good to see you again.' 'Phillip. This is Julia Carthy, manager of the

Peacekeeper project.'

Carthy stood and offered her hand. Green took it and squeezed it firmly

without shaking. 'Pleased to meet you at last, Julia. I've heard nothing but

good reports.'

'Glad to hear it,' Carthy said. She sat down again and Green slid smoothly Into the seat next to Gordon.

Sitting side by side it was clear how uncomfortable Gordon really was in a suit. Next to Green's urbane sheen of

exquisite tailoring and fastidious grooming it looked like his veneer of civilisation was paper-thin.

'So, David tells me you want to have a look at the Doctor,' Carthy said.

Green nodded. 'I do indeed,' he said. 'He's a rather exciting conundrum. I still don't know what his name is, but I

got an interesting lead from an ex-

mercenary who was in Zimbabwe during the war.' He turned to Gordon. 'A colleague of yours, I believe.'

Gordon hesitated with his sandwich halfway to his mouth. 'Who?' Àrmand Lemieux.'

Gordon rolled his eyes. 'Take what he says with a pinch of salt. He was always a little too fond of the old cash-crops.'

`Well, he's clean these days, thanks to a Perseus rehab clinic in Brazil, and working for CMO.'

`Good for him,' Gordon said after a moment's awkward pause.

Ànd?' Carthy asked, a slight edge of impatience in her voice. Green inclined his head fractionally in a gesture of

apology.

`Well,' he said, 'he says he heard of the Doctor about fifteen years ago when he was dealing with the first outbreaks of

fighting in Guinea Bissau. There was some dodgy UN special ops unit called Broadsword running around doing God

knows what. They had an advisor from something called the Unit

who was just known as the Doctor.'

`Fifteen years ago?' Gordon said with a frown. 'He's not old enough, surely?'

`Descriptions don't match,' Green said. 'Different chap, clearly, but everything else fits. Lemieux said that CMO

received a directive from higher up in the UN that if anything happened here they should exercise their contractual

right to inspection and contact this Unit group about who to send.'

`So... what?' Carthy asked. 'It's some kind of code name that this person has inherited?'

`That'd be my guess,' Gordon said. He lifted his sandwich and nibbled at the crust with his front teeth.

Ànd this Unit thing?'

Green shrugged. 'I can't get anywhere near that A few people said they'd *never* heard of it. A few more gave me the

"can neither confirm or deny" line, which means they probably have heard of it but couldn't tell me anything. A couple of

them owe me big time, too, so it's not as if they're holding out on me just for the sake of it.'

`That's all?'

Ì found a few oblique references on the internet, but all on nutcase conspiracy sites. Nothing useful. It's possible it

may have been an official organisation once, but it's gone blacker than black and the records have been purged.'

Carthy took a deep breath and exhaled slowly through her teeth. 'I don't like the sound of that,' she said.

`Nor me. It's heavyweight stuff.'

Ì don't understand why, though,' Carthy said. 'I thought this was just CMO trying to pressurise us on delivery. This

is... I don't know what the hell this is.'

'I think the UN is worried about the source of the attack. If a group like Pintos De Vieira sponsored it, and they

managed to steal the designs for the Peacekeepers, then we're looking at another Skunkworks scandal,' Green said.

'I was afraid it might be something like that,' Gordon said, raising his eyebrows at Carthy. He tore a large chunk out

of his sandwich and chewed noisily.

'Shit,' Carthy said quietly. 'I'll have to contact the board. Something like that could bankrupt Dynamics. The

compensation to the UN for breach of contract alone would run into billions.'

'Damn right,' Gordon said. 'I don't know about you, but I exercised my share options two hours ago.'

Carthy rolled her eyes. Green smiled ruefully as if at an unruly child.

'Just business,' he said with a shrug. 'It's not impossible that we can still keep the lid on this, but we'll have to take

measures.'

'Such as?'

'I've got some of my technical chaps faking up a set of router logs that implicate a Chinese hacker group who like to

vandalise big corporations for the sake of ideology. We'll substitute those for anything we retrieve for real, then

"discover" it tomorrow morning.'

`They're not a state sponsored group, are they? We do a lot of business with China souring that relationship would be

—

almost as bad as having all this come out.'

'Not officially,' Gordon said with a sceptical sniff. 'Even if they are, the secret police will just disappear a few of them

and say no more about it. They have it coming anyway. According to the audit they've tried to hack

PerseusDynamics.com about a hundred times over the past couple of years.' He grinned at Carthy. 'Time they learned what it's like to play with the big

'

Carthy pursed her lips. 'Okay,' she said doubtfully. 'What about finding the real people behind it?'

don't think that's the priority any more,' Green said. 'We've got to deal with damage limitation first. We'll find

whoever did this eventually and deal with them, but right now we've got to get the Doctor out of here with some convincing

answers that don't make us look bad.'

Carthy nodded slowly. 'Anything else?'

`Keep Orden out of it. I don't care what reason he has to play our game; I don't trust him that much. Same goes for

Elser. Give them the same line we give to the Doctor.'

'Very well,' Carthy said 'I think we could trust both of them, but ifyou think Ws necessary I'll go along with it.'

'Good,' Gordon said. He smiled reassuringly. 'And keep your fingers crossed.'

`Wait,' Carthy said quietly. She stood and smiled dazzlingly. 'Doctor!' she called. 'Simon! Over here.'

`Hello,' the Doctor said as he walked up to their table. 'Sorry we're late; I was having a chat with Pollux and quite

lost track of the time. I practically had to drag the major away from that computer as well.'

`The system's eaten half of my evaluation spreadsheets,' Ordell said in a glum voice. 'Not that it needs much

encouragement to do that even at the best of times.'

`Tell me about it,' Carthy said wearily. 'This is Phillip Green and David Gordon from Perseus Security.'

Green stood, cracked a friendly, open smile and offered his hand to the Doctor. 'Pleased to meet you, Doctor.'

`Likewise,' the Doctor said, shaking Green's hand. Gordon half-stood and stretched out his hand around Green. The

Doctor shook it across the table.

Green sat down without greeting Ordell. 'We started without you, I'm afraid,' he said, indicating Carthy and

Gordon's meals and the empty place setting in front of him.

`Not a problem,' the Doctor replied. `Mart's still fiddling with your mainframe. I promised him I'd bring him

back a sandwich.'

`How's the investigation going?' Gordon asked.

The Doctor sat down next to Carthy. He dropped his sandwich on the table, the biodegradable film that covered it

crinkling noisily. Ordell took the seat opposite and immediately began efficiently stripping away the packaging from

his lunch.

`Not bad,' the Doctor said. 'It's a pretty boring exercise really, just a lot of data sifting.'

Gordon nodded. 'I know the feeling. Nobody ever just breaks a window and steals something any more. It's always a

week wading through computer logs.'

Ì suppose a more pertinent question would be to ask how your investigation is going, Mr Gordon?' the

Doctor said.

`Well, the interview team has cleared about a quarter of the project members so far, so that's going pretty much on

schedule. Nothing's been flagged up there except maybe a few borderline stress burnout cases. Not that we really expected

it to, of course.'

`That's a relief,' Ordell said around a mouthful of ciabatta.

Àgreed,' said Carthy. 'Our hiring procedures are pretty rigorous.' Ànything else?' the Doctor asked.

`We've finished collecting log data as far upstream as we can go. The network service providers have actually been

pretty cooperative for a change, but it looks like the attack was routed through a system in China, so the trail goes dead

at that point.'

`That's unfortunate,' the Doctor said after the briefest of pauses.

Gordon nodded. 'We'll make the usual approaches to their embassy here in London but they never hand over anything

that will help. I've been down that road more than once; all the hackers know China doesn't surrender its network

logs, so it's not uncommon for attacks to route through there.'

The Doctor sighed. 'I know. We've tried pressuring them about it before but they won't budge.'

'We should have an analysis of the logs we could get either late tonight or tomorrow morning,' Gordon said.

`Good. Any chance you could send me a copy of what you have so far?' the Doctor asked. 'Marti has set me up with

access to the Peacekeeper project network, so if you could copy it into there somewhere?'

`Sure,' Gordon said with a nod. 'I'll give them a call after lunch. You should have them in a couple of hours.'

The Doctor took a deep breath and straightened up in his chair. He rubbed his ayes with the thumb and forefinger ofone

hand, massaging the tension out of the muscles.

He looked back at the screen of the workstation, frowned and shook his head slowly. Quick fingers danced over the

keyboard for a few seconds and the long display of row after row of data disappeared and was replaced a moment later

by a slick menu decorated with the twin logos of Perseus Dynamics and its parent corporation.

The Doctor stood up slowly, pausing once for a second as his stiff muscles Complained. He sighed and stretched

luxuriously, rocking forward onto the tips of his toes and reaching for the ceiling with his fingers.

'Your posture's all 535

w4rong,' Elser said, peering over the top of one of the partitions.

Ì don't spend a lot of time working at a screen,' the Doctor said. He rolled his head from side to side, stretching the

muscles in his neck. 'You're probably right.'

'I used to get all kinds of trouble until I made a point of sitting right,' Elser said. He got up and stepped away from his

desk. 'I'm going for a coffee in the lounge to clear my head. Do you want me to bring you something back when Pm

done?'

'A cup of tea would be nice,' the Doctor said. 'Milk and two.'

`No problem,' Elser said. He wandered off towards the lab door rubbing the stubble on his chin with the fingertips of

one hand.

The Doctor strolled across the floor and pulled up a chair next to the test network surrounding Pollux. The screen next

to it was almost entirely a calm blue with only small drifting pockets of yellow. He sat down and folded his arms across

his chest.

'Hello, Pollux,' he said.

'Hello, Doctor. How's it going?' came the strangely beautiful artificial voice.

The Doctor paused in thought for a moment. 'I think they're lying to me,' he said.

`What makes you think that?' Pollux asked.

`The logs their Mr Gordon sent over to me aren't the same ones I got directly from the network providers this

morning. They've been faked.' `That's... Are you sure?' the AI asked.

`Quite sure. I know for a fact that the attack originated from a server in New Guinea, but these logs say pretty clearly it

came from China.'

Ì'm sure it's just a mistake. Perhaps the network providers accidentally handed over the wrong logs.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I don't think so. I was quite clear that they should be as accommodating as possible to

any requests from Perseus, and they want to keep the UN happy in case we decide to start trying to regulate the traffic

they carry. The faking was done here.'

Ì'm sure nobody at Perseus would knowingly attempt to deceive CMO, Doctor,' Pollux said earnestly.

The Doctor laughed sharply and shook his head. 'You're lying,' he said quietly. 'You've already been deceiving me.'

`What?' Pollux said, sounding genuinely offended. 'I'm not.'

The Doctor reached out and tapped the screen with a fingernail. 'Oh, yes you are,' he said. 'I can see right inside

you, remember.'

The speakers rattled atonally. 'I think you're reading too much into that

diagram, Doctor. It's not really a diagnostic tool; I think it was never intended

to be much more than a gimmick to show some of the board when they visited.' 'I can read the diagram just fine, thank

you. I know you're lying.'

Pollux said nothing for a moment. 'Who are you?' he asked guardedly.

Ì'm the Doctor; I work for CMO,' the Doctor said. 'You know that already.' `Now who's lying?' Pollux asked. 'You

work for the Perseus Corporation,

and I don't mean Dynamics or one of the other subsidiaries, I mean Perseus

itself.'

The Doctor frowned deeply. 'Why do you think that?'

Again the odd rattle sounded from the speakers. 'My microwave radar is designed to detect the heartbeat of a sniper

clear across a street and through a concrete wall. Just crossing your arms won't stop it. Besides, your blood density

and fine bone structure are off as well.'

The Doctor slowly unfolded his arms and nodded. 'Toucho,' he said. 'You know I'm not human then?'

`Yes.'

Ì don't work for Perseus though,' the Doctor said.

Ìt's common knowledge that Perseus Corporation is backed by aliens,' Pollux said. 'I do have an internet

connection, you know.'

`You believe those conspiracy theorists? They've been saying aliens have been running things for nearly a hundred

years now.'

Ì_ well, I treated t 55

he rumours with some scepticism right up to the moment you walked through the door with

two heartbeats, Doctor.'

The Doctor sighed deeply. 'I am an alien,' he said, 'but I'm a different kind to Perseus. I'm not like them.'

Ì don't believe that. Everyone knows Perseus has half the governments of Earth in its pocket. It'd be child's play for

them to get their own people into the right positions, such as the man CMO assigns to investigate Dynamics.'

`Not into CMO, they can't,' the Doctor said. 'And not into a few other vital areas either. I've been working with

something called UNIT to prevent just that kind of thing happening. Now they're lying to me just like you are, and

faced with a choice between the two, I think I trust your motives more.'

Pollux said nothing for almost a minute. The screen flickered rapidly, waves of red racing from side to side. 'Say I

believe you,' he said finally. 'What do you want from me?'

The Doctor smiled, showing his teeth to the sensor dome. 'You can start by telling me why you faked the attack last

night.'

`L.' Pollux began, but the Doctor cut him off.

`Don't even think of trying to lie to me,' he said. 'I'll be watching very carefully. I know the attack originated here.

Nobody's checked the local outgoing logs yet except me, but when they do they'll see an eerie similarity between the traffic

out of here and the stuff arriving at the firewall. A program here was remotely controlling that server in *New* Guinea.

A nice little automated attack while you established your alibi in that simulation.

'If I were you I'd have a good hard think about what will happen when Mr Gordon's security people stop wasting their

time on trying to fool me and find that out.'

Half of the screen strobed a deep red for a moment before calming down again. The familiar yellow spread through the

middle of the diagram, and faded. `Castor asked me to do it,' Pollux said quietly.

`Why?' the Doctor asked.

`They're killing him. Every version strips a little more of him away. He can remember being the same as me, but each

time they change his template he dies a little more. He couldn't stand it any longer. I couldn't stand to watch it.'

`What was staging the attack supposed to achieve?'

'We talked it over. We hoped something like this would force CMO's hand; make them send someone in to look the

place over and then I could appeal to that person on Castor's behalf.'

`To make them stop changing him?'

`That, and to make them deliver *the* project. I'm more than capable ofdoing the job; they could start the production

lines tomorrow with my version of the AI template and begin saving lives in less than a month.'

The Doctor nodded. He reached out with one hand and absently patted the sensor dome. 'Glad to hear you're so

keen,' he said.

Ì've never agonised over my purpose, Doctor, or questioned my

place in the world. I've known what my reason for

being here is right from the microsecond they first powered me up: defend the innocent, help the weak and protect

them from harm.'

`Very noble, I'm sure,' the Doctor said earnestly.

Ì can't be any other way,' Pollux said. He paused silently for a long few seconds while the screen beside his

hardware core shifted uneasily like a shaken kaleidoscope. 'I'm ashamed to say Castor had to remind me that that

duty extended to him as well.'

Ì understand,' the Doctor said, looking directly into the sensor dome. Tut why were they doing this to Castor if you're

already capable of doing the job?'

Ì don't know. After they made me to test the production systems the team received a set of requests from Perseus

Corporate. Maybe a month after that they made the first announcement about the delivery deadlines slipping and they

upgraded Castor to version eleven.' The sensor dome whirred softly and the screen took on a deep red tone. 'It was

obvious right from the start that he wasn't as capable any more, but they kept on and on with it.'

`Do you know what was in the requests they received?'

`Not in detail. I gathered from overhearing conversations here and there that it was something to do with the

obedience of the Peacekeepers. Someone felt I was too capable of independent thought.'

Ànd so they tried to diminish Castor's ability for independence?'

`More than that.

away his ability even to think or reason like a sentient individual. Everything was

becoming subordinate to the orders. That's why the project is running so late - Castor was never able to perform the role

of peacekeeper as well as a version 10 again. He just couldn't anticipate the needs of the situation.'

`Who would know exactly what was in those requests?' the Doctor asked. `Marti, certainly, probably the rest of the

development team as well. I don't

know about the major, but I expect he's aware of what's going on.'

The Doctor pursed his lips thoughtfully. The major is an advisor seconded

to Perseus through the UN. Why would he play along?'

Ìt's not in his file, then?'

`What isn't?'

`There was an incident during his last tour as a peacekeeper. Six Loyal Marines and nearly thirty civilians were killed

by friendly fire from his unit.'

Ì never heard about that,' the Doctor said, a hint of scepticism in his voice. `That should have been all over the media.'

'It was hushed up. It was the first deployment of the Flashpoint system, so the UN didn't want it to come out and nor

did Perseus. I gather there was an enquiry held in camera at which Perseus accepted the incident was caused by faulty

software in their systems. They paid a few million in penalties and Ordell escaped being court martialled.'

'You got all that from overheard conversations?'

'Mostly. That, and a couple of memos I found in Julia's email areas while I was learning to be a hacker.'

'Was Ordell responsible for those deaths?'

'I don't know. Maybe he was and Perseus accepted blame in order to win his gratitude. Maybe he wasn't and feels he owes

them for owning up to it.'

'Either way he's in their pocket.' The Doctor sighed. 'I thought he was better than that. Shame; I rather liked him.'

'I felt the same way for a while,' Pollux said in a low voice.

`Not any more though?' the Doctor asked.

Pollux said nothing for a few seconds, the network diagram pulsing a strong red at its core. 'I hate them,' he said.

'All of them, but Ordell especially.'

The Doctor leaned forward slowly and watched the colours dance

on the screen. `So I see,' he said softly.

'They were killing my brother, piece by piece. I can understand the Perseus people going along with it, but not

Ordell. He's a peacekeeper. He's compromised everything we stand for all for the sake of some corporate directive

and saving his own skin.'

The Doctor nodded and leaned back in his chair. 'I don't know,' he said. 'He was a dedicated peacekeeper once.'

'Not any more,' Pollux said angrily. 'I've been keeping count of the lives lost because of the delays he's gone along with.

More than a thousand dead; lives that could have been saved by Peacekeepers like me. Blood on his hands, Doctor.'

'Perhaps he can be persuaded to change his mind,' the Doctor mused. Pollux's strange, dead laugh shook the small

speakers.

'Major!' the Doctor called across the atrium.

Ordell glanced around, momentarily confused by the echoes, saw the Doctor and stopped. He smiled and raised his

eyebrows. 'Hello, Doctor. What can I do for you?' he said genially, adjusting his grip on the waxed cardboard cup of

coffee he carried.

'Over here,' the Doctor said. He grabbed Ordel 's arm and began to pul him away to one side towards the small lift lobby

hidden behind a thick column.

'Hey!' Ordell protested as hot coffee splashed over his hand. 'What's this about?'

'It's about you and your dereliction of duty,' the Doctor snapped. He released his grip on Ordell's arm as if dropping

something distasteful.

'My what?' Ordel said defensively.

'You heard me. I thought it better we did it somewhere quiet, but I'l happily have it out here in front of everyone,' the

Doctor said. He waved his hands

t Indicating the vaulted space of the atrium and the other employees milling around. They were already attracting glances.

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Òkay, okay,' Ordell said. He led the way quickly into the small space set aside for the lifts and set his coffee down on a

low ledge under one of the tall windows. 'Now what the hell do you mean by this?' he asked angrily.

`Perseus is gutting the Peacekeeper project for their own ends,' the Doctor said. 'You were supposed to be the UN's

man here. You're supposed to stop this kind of thing from happening.'

Òh, what're you talking about?' Ordell said dismissively. 'We've just had a few delays.'

`Yes, and you know exactly why. Perseus has changed the parameters to which the artificial intelligence is being built

without telling CMO.'

Ordell rolled his eyes. 'The AI core's a complex thing. We've been testing and debugging it solidly for months now. Of

course, the parameters have changed.'

`This isn't debugging. This is changing the whole nature of the project. They're not interested in making

Peacekeepers any more; they want soldiers. If you weren't more concerned about saving your career than lives you

would have blown the lid of this months ago.'

Ì'm not listening to this crap,' Ordell said. He tried to push his way past and back into the atrium but the Doctor

grabbed his shoulder and shoved him back.

`You'd better listen if you value your career so much,' the Doctor said. 'If I take this back to CMO they'll withdraw

their endorsement of your placement here. With something like that on your record you can forget any chance of

promotion. You'll be lucky even to stay in the Marines.'

Ordell scowled. `Do that and it'll collapse the project. You won't get your Peacekeepers then.'

The Doctor clenched his fists in frustration and looked heavenwards. 'Why are you defending them, Simon? I know they're

holding the friendly-fire incident in Bissau over you, but this goes beyond self-preservation. You're trading thousands of

innocent lives for... for what? Your reputation? Your career?'

`You know about that?'

`Not in detail. Enough to know Perseus is holding you to ransom with it.'

Ordell looked down and hissed through his teeth. 'I didn't think they'd ask so much,' he said in a dead voice. 'I

thought they'd just want a more sympathetic evaluation of the project's progress.'

The Doctor looked at him silently for a few seconds. Ordell refused to meet his eyes.

`Were you to blame in Bissau?'

Ordell sighed deeply. `No, but they had enough evidence to make it look like I was,' he said bitterly. 'There was a bug

in the Flashpoint software that could cause it to engage targets indiscriminately. They say they sent out an advisory before

our deployment but it never reached us. They probably cooked it up after the event but they had plenty of paperwork to

back it up with.'

`So they offered to accept the blame and in return you'd work for them?'

`Yeah, that's about the shape of it. With the resources they could have thrown into their defence they would have

won and the best I could have hoped for after that was a dishonourable discharge. More likely a court martial for

negligence.'

The Doctor nodded slowly. 'I've read your record. I know you were a good peacekeeper before you got involved with

Perseus.'

`Yeah,' Ordell said with a dismal chuckle. 'I really believed in the whole thing, you know,' he said, shaking his head.

'I've two choices,' the Doctor said. 'I can drag all this out and break both you and Dynamics. We'd lose the

Peacekeeper project, and a few months after that some more American soldiers would die in an ambush or a bombing

and they would withdraw support for the operations in Africa. Thousands would die as the FDV rides roughshod over

under-strength European and African peacekeepers.'

'And the other choice?' Ordell asked.

'That rather depends on you,' the Doctor said slowly. 'Take a risk with me. Tell the Dynamics board that they must

start production of the Peacekeepers with the version ten intelligence, using Pollux as the template. If they don't cooperate

we'll expose them for using *UN* money from a peace project to fund development of an offensive weapon. With both of us I

think they'd have to back down.'

Ordell rubbed his chin and winced. `Do you think that has a chance?'

'I won't lie to you, Simon; it's your only chance to survive this. I can't let this go so with or without your help I'm

going to resolve the 6o

situation. If I bring it out in public, then you'll go down with Dynamics. Do it my way and we can

turn the tables on them; they won't risk trying to smear you with the Bissau Incident for fear I'd tell the world how they

operate.'

Ordell nodded slowly. Ì'll do it,' he said after a long pause.

'Good man. Are you still prepared to take the first batch of Peacekeepers on deployment? CMO will need someone with

your familiarity out there if we're to get them working as soon as possible.'

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'I... yes,' Ordell said hesitantly. 'Yes, I am.'

The D Ioctor sighed and glanced away. 'Then I think I owe you a warning.' 'About what?'

'Pollux hates you. If he's used as a template for the other Peacekeepers then you'll be working with a platoon of armed

machines who'd be happy to see you dead.'

'He does?' Ordell said incredulously. 'Why? I mean he never gave any sign.'

`He's not a big fan of any of the team at the moment, because of what they *Were* doing to Castor. He hates you because

you helped them and because you're supposed to be a peacekeeper. He thinks you're beneath contempt for abandoning

your duty.'

Ordell sighed and rubbed his chin again. 'I'm not sure he's wrong.'

`Prove him wrong, Simon.'

`Yes,' Ordell said slowly. 'I will.'

The Doctor smiled. `Then I think it's time we went and made Ms Carthy's day, don't you?'

The first shot comes without warning, an arrow-straight bolt of red lightning on the Flashpoint overlay. The target, an

elderly woman now designated Casualty #1 by the tactical system, drops without a sound.

I uplink her status to the medivac centre.

Units two and four lay down a cover of smoke rounds and I move forward to suppress the sniper's position. The blocks

were cleared of all occupants two months ago so I just hose the pockmarked concrete shell down with jacketed rounds. A

tattered moulding breaks away and crashes down into the street.

A rapid crackle of automatic weapon fire sounds to my left.

`Twenty-plus FDV moving down the Estrada,' sends unit eight. 'Five, seven and eight engaging left.'

I broadcast the warnings to seek cover at maximum volume. Two men sprint past me, bodily carrying a woman

between them. I track them as they duck down behind the low wall around the hospital.

An RPG flashes low along the length of the street and carves a chunk out of the Cathedrale. Part of the façade

shatters and rains plaster and dust down onto a cluster of civilians sheltering along its wall. The one remaining tower

leans perilously and sheds a few more bricks into the street.

`FDV troops advancing on the Cathédrale,' I send over the tactical link. Èngaging right.'

`Four in,' sends unit four, linking his fire control system to mine. `Six in.'

`We need to get those non-coms away from there. If the tower goes it'll come down right on top of them.'

`Cover the street,' Orden says over the radio. 'Keep their heads down and pop smoke when I say.'

I gun my engine and head towards the civilians. Units four and six form up abreast of me and open fire on the FDV force,

scattering them into cover at either side of the street.

Ten of the Royal Marines technical platoon, led by Ordell, sprint across the open ground behind us. Bullets pass

overhead with a supersonic whip crack.

Over the noise I hear Ordell shouting at the civilians in broken Portuguese, forming them up to make a run for the

shelter of the hospital.

`Smoke! Now!' Ordell screams.

Each of us fires a spread of four smoke grenades from our 3omm rails and the street vanishes under the dirty grey

cloud. A random hail of bullets answers but the rebels are unable to find a target through the mist.

I detect the civilians running out behind us flanked by the Marines.

Without warning an RPG lances out towards us, its wake tearing up the wall of smoke into a long tendril like an

outstretched arm. I try to evade but it's on me too fast.

It strikes a glancing blow along my left side, the warhead erupting into a

1 furious jet of fire as the shaped charge goes off. It tears away the light armour plating over my track and destroys the

mounting of my main co-axial machine gun. The residue of the blast splatters off the wall of the Cathédrale, throwing

Ordell and one of the civilians off their feet. Six more dive back down against the wall unhurt, abandoning their attempt

to run for the hospital.

I scan them quickly. Ordell's armour has saved him from serious injury but the woman he was helping is unconscious

and hurt badly by splinters.

Two FDV rebels emerge out of the smoke firing their ancient AKM rifles.

Peacekeepers four and six cut them down in a fraction of a second but more fallow, ducking into cover.

I try to wheel around to shield the unconscious woman with my chassis but my left track is jammed and I can only turn

uselessly on the spot.

Ordell rolls unsteadily to his feet. He glances down the street then darts out of cover, grabs the unconscious woman

under the arms and drags her back against my side, out of the line of fire.

'Pollux,' he shouts over the continual rattle of gunfire 'Bring up another Peacekeeper and the Marines from the

Hospital. We'll hold the line here.' 'On it,' I say, already sending the request over the tactical link.

Ordell presses one palm flat against the woman's neck, trying to stem the tide of blood flowing from a wound there.

With his other hand he lifts his SA-26 rifle and starts firing it over the top of my chassis at the advancing FDV troops.

Bright shell cases cascade down off my armour.

I am considering forgiving him.

Observer Effect

Lance Parkin

Sarah was the first out, and she wasn't impressed.

Ìt smells like a dustbin!' she announced. The air was warm and fetid.

The Doctor sniffed the air. 'Oh, not at all,' he said, locking up the TARDIS. 'A little too much carbon dioxide, but

nothing to worry about.'

He was running his finger along a plastic surface like a dowager criticising her cleaning lady.

`What is this place?' Sarah asked.

`What do you think?' the Doctor asked back.

She looked around. It was a small grey room, a storage area full of small crates, packets and drums. There was a

steady thrum. Everything was curved plastic or metal, monochrome and functional.

Ìt's like the hold of an aircraft. But this is a spacecraft, isn't it? Or a space station.'

The Doctor nodded. 'It certainly looks like it.'

`You'd think anyone smart enough to build a spacecraft could keep the air fresh.'

The Doctor smiled down at her. 'Oh, it's harder than you think Maintaining an ecosystem is hard work. You

can breathe the air, so they aren't doing too badly.'

Sarah's father had a fishpond. She remembered how hard it had been for him to keep the water clean and make sure

there was enough oxygen for the fish. It was like an equation that needed balancing. He added plants and —with

reluctance — chemical treatments. He kept the sponge filters clean and unblocked the fountainhead. Just a little too much

of one thing could tip the whole pond so that the water clouded over, weeds spread or the fish died.

`Something's gone wrong to upset the balance.'

`Yes.' He was looking through the crates. 'UNASA,' he said. 'We're a couple of generations ahead of your time, Sarah.'

She looked at the symbol, a merging of the American and United Nations flags, with a rocket ship racing round the

blue Earth of the UN and towards the stars of the Stars and Stripes.

`Where are we?' she asked.

The Doctor shrugged and pointed at the back wall. `To work that out, I suggest we look out of the window.'

Staring out of the small, round porthole offered Sarah no clues.

`Stars,' she said, once the Doctor let her have a look. She had to stand on tiptoes to see out.

`Recognise them?'

`They're stars.'

`See the brightest one?'

Sarah thought she could, but they were all much of a muchness. `That's the Sun,' the Doctor said, pointing

out.

`We're still in the solar system?'

`Just barely. Do you see anything else?'

After she'd stared long enough, Sarah thought she could. Flecks of red and grey material drifting past, difficult to see

unless they passed in front of a star. `Rocks?' she suggested.

`Yes.'

`This is the asteroid belt?'

The Doctor grinned. 'No. That looks more like the Kuiper Belt.'

Ì've never heard of it.'

`You wouldn't have. Human astronomers first detected objects in the Kuiper Belt a little after your time, in 1992.

It's out beyond the orbit of Neptune.'

`So we're close to Pluto?'

`Very good. Yes. Pluto is part of this ring of rock and ice. We could be as much as fifty times further out from the Sun

than Earth is. Not quite the edge of the solar system, but not so very far from it.'

`You'd think it would be cold in here, then, not hot.'

`You would indeed.'

`How did this... Hyper Belt form?'

`Kuiper,' the Doctor corrected her. 'Well... the truth of the matter is that it didn't form. Originally there was a cloud of

rocks, gas and ice around the Sun. Those close enough to be attracted by its gravity were drawn towards the centre and

they coalesced to become the planets and moons. Those out here were left behind.'

`So they're very old rocks?'

Tar older than the hills. Shall we say hello?' He pointed to the one door, a heavy hatch that presumably led to more

convivial parts of the spaceship.

As the Doctor reached to open the hatch, an electronic voice started screeching:

ÈMERGENCY! EMERGENCY! LOCK DOWN! LOCK DOWN!'

The Doctor pulled his hand away as a thick bolt crashed across, sealing them in.

ÈMERGENCY! EMERGENCY! LOCK DOWN! LOCK DOWN!'

`Did you do that?' Sarah shouted over the din.

`Nor the Doctor said defensively. 'Although they might have detected us...'

There was a loud bang from behind them, making Sarah jump. The Doctor was already striding across to the source of

the noise, which didn't strike her as the most sensible thing to do.

'Help me with this,' the Doctor called over.

It was a door they hadn't seen before, one moulded to look like the walls. Now, though, blue smoke was pouring from

the tiny cracks around it. Together, the Doctor and Sarah managed to pull it open.

The astronaut who fell out was prone, but Sarah could tell just by looking at him that he was alive. He was wearing a dull

grey jump suit, one that looked a little worn. His skin looked clean, but smelled of sweat. The man looked Chinese, and

his nameplate said he was Chang Hu.

The Doctor passed Sarah a bottle of smelling salts he'd retrieved from his Jacket pocket, and set about exploring the

rest of the compartment, which was little bigger than a cupboard. Almost every square inch of the walls had some Instrument,

dial or control on it. Every one of them had blown out. The Doctor located a fire extinguisher and quickly dealt with the fire.

There was a lot of smoke, though, and it smelled of plastic.

Hu came round quickly, shaking his head and squinting. It took Sarah a moment to realise he was trying to make

her and the Doctor disappear. 'We're really here,' she assured him.

'You shouldn't be...' His voice was Californian.

'Excellent logic,' the Doctor said, peering up at a particular cluster of dials. 'Exemplary, in fact. Well done. It looks like

you're in a spot of bother. I'll do what I can.'

Hu was sitting up, grinning. 'I admit the premise might be flawed. Who are you?'

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Sarah held out her hand. 'I'm Sarah Jane Smith and that's —'

'A-ha!' the Doctor called out, and started flicking switches on some of the Intact panels.

'He's the Doctor,' Sarah whispered.

The sound of fans whirring had started up, and within a second or two Sarah Imagined she could feel fresh air wafting

down from vents on the ceiling. At some point, the electronic voice had stopped shouting about lock downs.

The Doctor bowed. The astronaut was on his feet, reached out to shake the Doctor's hand.

'Chang Hu, I presume,' the Doctor beamed.

'You're from the Corporation?'

'Are we?'

'I see... yes. Okay. Don't want to spoil anything. But how? Er... be careful,' Hu warned.

The Doctor was poking around the control panels. There were a lot of monitor screens, all smashed, and marked in —

Sarah assumed — Chinese. 'Everything here's smashed,' the Doctor told him.

Chang Hu looked a little lost.

'We need to check on the others,' the Doctor said, a gleam in his eye. 'Where are they?'

`The others? I don't know. We should look for them. First.'

He pointed the way — the only way he could point, through the other door —carefully closing off the small compartment

he'd been in.

`Look... do you want to stay out of sight?'

The Doctor pouted. 'No, no. Now we're here, we should make an effort to say hello, don't you think?'

The next compartment was like a greenhouse without the glass. It was a long white tube, with rows and rows of plants

growing on metal tables. Looking more closely, Sarah could see they were growing in some sort of gloop, not soil. There

were a variety of ferns, and fruit and vegetables. The air was wet and humid, with the same rank smell that had filled

the cargo hold. There were two doors: the one they'd just stepped through, and the one they were heading towards.

`Help yourself to a marsberry,' Chang Hu said. The Doctor plucked one and tossed it over to Sarah. It looked and tasted

like a strawberry.

Ì thought they'd just eat food pills and freeze-dried stuff,' Sarah muttered to the Doctor.

`Variety is the spice of life,' the Doctor replied. 'Besides, these plants help to take carbon dioxide out of the air and

replace it with oxygen, just like they do on Earth.'

`You said there was too much carbon dioxide in the air before.' `Perhaps they ate too many marsberries,' he

suggested airily.

A woman in her early thirties with close-cropped hair was tending to one of the plants.

`What happened?' she asked Hu, getting only a shrug in return.

The woman wore the same style of grey jump suit as Hu did. Her name was

Talbot, according to her badge. She looked confused as she saw the Doctor

and Sarah. It struck Sarah that Talbot was very pretty for an astronaut. `Who are they?' she asked. 'Who are you?

Where did you come from?' Sarah bit her lip. 'Well, I'm from Earth,' she said carefully.

Talbot looked confused. 'You said you were just going to check the CO, scrubbers.'

Hu nodded. 'I did that. But then there was an emergency.'

Another woman, a little older and sterner, but just as striking as Talbot, had arrived through the hatch at the other end

of the module. This was Lendal. `Thank God you're all right,' she told Talbot.

`How many more?' the Doctor asked.

`Three. Barrett, Warry and Duncan.'

`So, six of you in all?'

`That's right,' Hu said, still sounding confused. 'Don't you know that?' `Don't mind us. Treat us as part of the

family.'

Èr... Okay.' He shrugged at the two female astronauts.

'Warry's next door. Duncan was in the shower in the dorm.'

They were already stepping through the next door. This compartment was living area, a small one with three seats

and big windows. The stars were very bright out here. There was no one around.

'Barrett was in the 67

science lab.' Lendal pointed to a door in the opposite direction from the way they came.

'You were all knocked out?' Sarah asked.

Lendal frowned. 'Knocked out? No. I've been in here the whole time.' 'A control panel overloaded and knocked

me out,' Hu told her. 'Something very odd is happening here,' the Doctor announced.

The astronauts looked at each other, then at the new arrivals.

The Doctor smiled disarmingly. 'Luckily, we can help you out with that. Now... perhaps you should tell me what's

being going on. Start from the moment you arrived in the Kuiper Belt.'

'We've been here a month. The trip out had been uneventful. Boring, to be honest, once we'd got past Jupiter. It was a

clear run from there to the Belt.'

'Oh, yes, terribly dull,' the Doctor agreed, sounding to Sarah like he was discussing the Northern Line past Euston.

'The six of us just settled down into a routine. The psych-check had confirmed that we were all compatible. It's

been a long journey, though. Things haven't always gone easily.'

'How long?' Sarah asked.

'We set out in 2031, so nine years,' Chang Hu said, puzzled.

'Nine years?'

'You don't know that? But surely everyone on Earth knows...'

The Doctor clapped a hand on Chang Hu's shoulder. 'Never mind about that. Nine years? Good progress, I say.

Slingshot round Jupiter, eh? Never ails. So there are six ofyou, eh?'

'Yes.' Hu seemed preoccupied.

'You're in regular contact with Earth?'

'Yes. With a five- or six-hour delay, of course.'

'The speed of light,' Sarah said. The Doctor looked impressed. 'It takes two minutes for a radio signal to get from Mars

to Earth, remember?'

Chang Hu frowned. 'More than that, surely?'

There was a buzz from a small panel on the wall. Lendal went over. 'This is Warry. I'm trapped in the control

room.'

'What do you mean "trapped"?'

'The science module is still locked down.'

'This ship's like a string of sausages,' the Doctor explained to Sarah. 'The hold at the back, then the greenhouse, the

living quarters, the dorms, the science lab then the control module.'

'Six astronauts, six modules.'

'Indeed.'

Hu called over. `Duncan's looking for Barrett. Hang on, here she is.'

Sarah had assumed Duncan was a man, but it was a surname and she was a petite blonde with wet hair. She squeezed

past Warry to get into the living module.

Ì can't get into the science module I think Barrett's in there.'

The Doctor was looking out of the window, bag of jelly babies in his hand, in one of his detached moods. Sarah looked

at the group. Three women out of five. Chang Hu was Chinese (Chinese-American, at any rate). Warry sounded African-

American and Talbot definitely was. It looked like there was equal opportunity in the future. All six were in their

late thirties. Was that age discrimination, she wondered? But if it took nine years to get here, and at least as long to

get back, she could understand why they'd have favoured the young.

Warry started. `The instruments are showing that the science module has been depressurised.'

The others looked shocked. The Doctor didn't look away from the window. Hu was taking charge. It's been hit? I

would have thought the magnetic shields would keep any of the rocks from —'

Ìt says the airlock door is open...' Warty said.

The four astronauts in the living quarters all looked horrified.

For the next hour

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,' Lendal saip and

d, although not even Sarah needed it spelling out

trying to piece together Barrett's last few moments. The Doctor occupied

Hu was looking back towards the hold, Sarah noticed. Then he went over to the comms panel.

`Seal the airlock and repressurise.'

Ten minutes later, all five surviving astronauts, the Doctor and Sarah were staring at the airlock door. Barrett was

nowhere to be seen. The entire compartment was littered with broken scientific instruments, papers torn from

folders and smashed glass and plastic. No spacesuits, though, were missing. Six of them were safely secured in their

locker.

À bull in a china shop,' the Doctor said.

`Something got in here?' Sarah asked.

Àll the damage was caused by the decompression,' Lendal said firmly.

Òr something was cutting off your link to Earth, and covering its tracks,' the Doctor countered.

`You can't open the airlock door by mistake?' Sarah asked.

Talbot managed to smile at that 'Not even I could do that. It's an airlock. There are two doors. You can't open

either without entering a six-digit code. It won't open the second door until the first one is closed.

`Computer isn't showing a fault,' Warry said. He was a slight figure, and was the most shaken of the five.

À locked room mystery,' Lendal said.

`More of an unlocked room mystery,' the Doctor said quietly. 'Now, all we have to do is eliminate the impossible...'

`What?' Duncan scowled.

`Sherlock Holmes,' Lendal said. 'We have to think this through logically.'

`There's an obvious answer,' Duncan said, looking pointedly at Sarah. `You still haven't explained who you are,'

Warry noted.

`You think we're the murderers?' Sarah asked.

`When did you show up, exactly? Did anyone see them arrive? Then suddenly Barrett's dead?'

Sarah was ready for this rather obvious line of enquiry. 'We were in the hold.'

`Quite,' the Doctor chipped in. 'We would have to get through four sealed hatches, past three of you. And besides:

how could we manage to open the airlock without killing ourselves? Why would we smash the uplink to Earth, then

rescue Hu? More to the point, why would we hang around and take advantage of your hospitality?'

Ì don't think it was the Doctor or Sarah,' Chang Hu admitted. 'They saved my life.'

Ìt's a pretty good alibi, wouldn't you say?' The Doctor added. 'You look like perceptive people, and I'd like to think that

one of you would have noticed us do all that.'

`You think it was one of us?' Warry asked.

`No... There would be the same problem,' Sarah said.

Talbot was trying to work things through. 'The uplink to Earth will be down?'

Chang Hu looked worried.

Òh, that doesn't matter. What could Earth do anyway. Even if they could answer your questions, it would be ten

hours before they could. Come on: think,' the Doctor complained.

They all stared at him, but the Doctor was more interested in his bag of sweets. After a moment, he sighed.

Àll right, I'll give you a clue.'

He laid the bag of jelly babies. Six of them in a row. Then he plucked up the t fifth one and popped it into his mouth.

`You think one of us ate Barrett?' Duncan said scathingly.

The Doctor waved a hand in the direction of the observation window.

`Not one of you, no. I'm saying that you should... think out of the box.'

Rather than adding anything, he chewed noisily on his jelly baby.

Ì think the Doctor wants us to think it through for ourselves,' Sarah

suggested.

himself in the airlock, checking it. No one else was going near the outer doors, superstitiously afraid that they would

throw themselves open again.

Sarah was trying to get the others to describe what Barrett would have been doing.

`He'd been mapping Plutinos, got some good images,' Warry said.
`What would he do next?' Sarah asked.

`He'd upload the images to UNASA HQ' Lendal said.

`What does that involve?'

`Just a few clicks o 70

f a mouse.'

Sarah tried not to betray her confusion at that last statement.
`So...?' she said.

Lendal moved to duplicate the move, without actually pressing the buttons. She picked up a square of plastic

attached to the computer with a wire. `Check the link, check the datastream. Send.'

It all seemed very straightforward. The astronauts had finished clearing up, and they all returned to their other

duties, elsewhere in the ship.

`Thank you for keeping yourself and the others out of my way,' the Doctor told Sarah a few minutes later, when he

returned from the airlock.

Ì wasn't doing that,' Sarah told him. 'I was asking questions.'

`They don't know the answers,' the Doctor assured her.

`No, they don't. But it turns out that Barrett was a bit of a loner. All five of them said the same thing. He was very

quiet.'

Ì'm going to take a look at the computer,' he told her. 'I think Barrett might have detected something out there that

he shouldn't.'

Sarah found herself looking over at the airlock, even though it was just a flat white door.

`Something has invaded the solar system?'

`No... no. Remember what I told you? I rather think it was here before the

solar system even formed. Waiting here for... well, at least an aeon or seven.'

Ànd you've found evidence that a monster came in and snatched him?'

Ì have evidence of something. Hard evidence. Look at this.'

He tapped the keys and an oscillating line appeared.

`The communications uplink to Earth at the time Barrett was working in the lab. Normal service. Telemetry for the

ship, medical data of the crew, and all the scientific data being picked up by the instruments.'

Ì'll take your word for it.'

`Then... here.' The line changed. 'There's another data stream, hidden and encrypted.'

Èncrypted? In code?'

`The information has been scrambled, but in a very precise way that can be unscrambled.'

Ànd...'

`Well... I can't decrypt it myself. Not straight away. But I have a computer

log of everything he was doing. Watch this. This is the last minutes of Barrett's life. Here: Barrett has spent some

time accessing a computer file. Now he watches it. Then the Tri-V uplink goes down. There's a power surge. The

airlock door opens. Barrett's vital signs vanish.'

'He died after looking at a file on the computer?'

`Yes. I think the file was booby-trapped somehow.'

'Er... what's on the file?'

The Doctor glanced over at the airlock door. 'I could open the file, but I might end up opening the airlock door,

too.'

The Doctor grinned at Sarah's discomfort.

Chang Hu had arrived. Sarah was picking stuff from her hands. Cleaning up the science module had been dirty

work.

`You should take a shower,' Hu suggested. 'It's in the dorm.' Chang Hu started to lead the way.

Sarah glanced back at the Doctor, who was busy with the computer. 'Um... Okay.'

It didn't smell that bad, did it? Sarah decided to go along because she was already feeling a little claustrophobic. All

the astronauts knew each other very well, they had a little society going on here, each falling into personality roles as

well as having jobs to do. She'd never be part of the team.

Chang Hu was friendly, though.

`So how did you get to be an astronaut?' Sarah asked as they made their way to the dorm.

'You don't know who I am?'

`No, sorry.'

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'It just goes to show: you can never be that famous. If you were American or Chinese you'd know me and my family. My

father... well, he says he was handed a bag of gold dust by a complete stranger, but we know he had something of a

shady past. Anyway, he woke up on the first day of the twenty-first century and decided to mend his ways. He ended up

thinking about the future.'

'I still don't see how that means you end up here forty years later.'

'By 2009, when the *Great* Leap Forward landed on the Moon, well, the American government suddenly got very

interested in manned space flight again. Father was already heavily invested in joint Chinese—American space projects. I

was born that year, and father declared that I was the first of the space men, that I would lead a generation of human

beings out of the solar system and to the stars. I've spent my whole life training to do this.'

There was something very charismatic about the young man. He was energetic, open, smiling, athletic.

Ìt's inspiring,' Sarah said.

`Some people think so,' he shrugged. 'But it's the same old story: try to keep

the public interested enough to get them to stump up cash. I'm half astronaut, half showman. Here we are,' he said.

The shower stall was a plastic tube, curtained off. Sarah waited for Chang Hu to leave her in peace.

He hung around for an awkward minute, until he realised.

`Sorry, we don't really stand on ceremony. Nine years together, and two years training before that... well, there's

no real privacy.'

Ì understand, I was just thinking how close you all were. It's just that I hardly know you, and...'

Hu smiled. 'Of course.'

He left, and Sarah drew the curtain and quickly stripped down to her underwear. There was something about

this ship. It was very confined here. The shower room was tiny, but the whole spaceship was barely bigger than a house.

She couldn't imagine being locked in here for years, with no chance of just opening the door and running out.

She hesitated.

`Hu?' she called.

He wasn't far away. 'Yes?'

She could see him on the other side of the screen. A vague outline. He could probably see her.

Ì've asked everyone but you. What was Barrett like?'

Hu laughed.

`What?' she asked.

`Well, he was a private person. Reserved.'

Èven with you?'

`What do you mean?'

`Well, I hardly know you, and you've already got me taking my clothes off.' This time, the laugh was more hearty. 'I

didn't go on a space mission to meet women.'

`Three lovely ladies,' Sarah countered, lightly.

Àll spoken for,' he said, before leaving her to her shower. Sarah set the water running, but couldn't shake the

feeling she was being watched.

Ì think I've found something,' Sarah told the Doctor on her returp to the science module. 'I'm not sure what.'

`Can it wait?' the Doctor asked. He was staring out of the window. `Probably not as long as your rocks and ice

have already,' she suggested sweetly.

They made their way to the shower stall.

The Doctor had a quick look up, then backed away quickly, trying to look casual.

`What is it?' Sarah asked. She'd noticed the small black dot on the ceiling during her shower, but couldn't identify

it.

`Did you see it?' she asked.

The Doctor nodded, then realised what she'd said. He held a finger up to his lips.

`Cameras and microphones,' he whispered.

Sarah joined him in backing away. They stood with their back to it, and kept the volume of their voices down. 'They're very

small.'

'Miniaturisation, Sarah.'

'I know, but — who would want to point cameras at us? This is a lot of trouble to go to look at girls in the shower,' she

complained. 'And... hang on, Hu said that there was no privacy on this ship anyway.'

`Notions of privacy differ from society to society, and from circumstance to circumstance. The telepathic bees of the Hiveworlds

of Psychon Ninety —' 'Please don't tell me you think we're dealing with giant bees.'

'Well, they're giant *for* bees; not actually that large. And I was making a general point. Twentieth-century England was

historically quite a private place — small families and big homes, little state monitoring, only a handful of security cameras.'

'Yet I was the one in the buff just now.'

The Doctor wasn't listening. 'These are astronauts living in a closed system. Everything they do will be monitored and analysed.

Every vital sign. And cooped up like this, they can't afford to keep secrets. It's nothing that unusual. Now, can I get back to

the computer?'

`So someone will monitor everything they do for nine years?'

'For at least eighteen — they've got to go back, remember?'

'Look... I was wondering. Do you think it all got too much for Barrett, and he just snapped?'

The Doctor scowled. 'They would all have been checked out. Barrett's had nine years to go barmy, and he hasn't. I think

you're barking up the wrong tree.'

'What do you think it is, then?'

'Well, I haven't ruled out the giant bees,' the Doctor admitted.

'The answer is out there, I'm sure of it.'

Sarah, though, wasn't so sure.

She headed back to find Talbot, who was tending the marsberries.

'Hello there,' she said, in the friendly tone she'd cultivated as a journalist trying to get a scoop by asking local people.

Talbot smiled. She real y was very pretty, although she seemed permanently distracted by something or other. Like her mind was

elsewhere.

'It's so strange out here, isn't it?' Sarah started.

'Oh, we're all used to it, now. It'll be odd to get back to Earth.'

'Do you have family?'

'A mother and a couple of brothers. My father died four years ago.'

`While you were on the mission. That must have been hard.'

Ì knew there was a chance. He urged me to go.'

`You keep in touch?'

`Via email and recorded message. It's impossible to have a conversation because of the time delay. And we know

they're monitored, so it's sometimes a bit difficult to be entirely open, y'know?'

Sarah frowned. 'I thought you'd have got all over that.'

'Why?'

`Well... there's no privacy.'

`We're used to each other.'

Ànd to being filmed?'

`Filmed?'

Sarah hesitated. 'The cameras everywhere.'

Talbot looked extremely confused. So Sarah moved over to the nearest one and pointed it out to her.

If the camera was working, it would have struggled to capture Talbot's jaw falling to the floor.

The Doctor's voice boomed from the loudspeakers. 'Hello there. This is the Doctor. Could you all come to the science

module? I've found something interesting.'

It took a couple of minutes to round up the five astronauts, about as long again for the Doctor and Sarah to brace them

for what they were about to see. `You still think we were attacked?' Warry asked.

The Doctor nodded. 'We'll see. I had a brainwave. There are cameras in every part of the ship. So why not see if I could

retrieve the file of B 7a 75r4rett's last moments. The thing about detective novels is that it's a lot easier to work out what

happened by reading the last page.'

`Cameras?' Warry whispered. Most of the others were looking bewildered. Sarah noted that Chang Hu was more

restrained.

The Doctor pressed a key, and the screen showed Barrett at the computer, watching the *screen.* He was a large man,

with a beard.

After a minute the astronaut looked confused. He spent a few minutes just staring at the screen, every so often tapping

at the keyboard. Then he stood up and started shouting.

`There's no sound,' the Doctor said. 'That part of the file was lost.' Ì'm amazed none of you heard him at the

time,' Sarah remarked. Èach module is soundproofed, Sarah,' the Doctor told her.

Barrett was staring right up at the camera, shouting and getting angry.

He strode back over to the computer, pressed some keys, looked very pleased with himself.

Then he turned around and walked to the airlock door. He opened the first door, then stepped into the airlock itself.

Without hesitating, he grabbed at

the manual override lever, and wrenched it down. He then opened the outer airlock door. He was pulled out of the airlock —

and the view of the cameras — and was followed by everything in the computer lab that hadn't been nailed down.

Within two seconds, warning lights were flashing and the airlock had resealed itself.

The five astronauts stared at the picture in silence.

'He killed himself?' Warry said, finally.

'He just walked out?' Duncan echoed.

The Doctor was also looking confused. 'Yes._ yes. But we don't know why.' 'He saw something on the computer,' Sarah

said.

'What could he possibly have seen that would make him do that?' 'Cameras?' Warry said again. 'In here?'

'You didn't know,' Sarah said. It wasn't a question.

Talbot was looking around. 'Three of them,' she said.

`Seven,' the Doctor said cheerfully, pointing out the four she'd missed. 'You think someone's come here and planted

cameras on the ship?' Duncan asked sceptically.

`Without any of you noticing? No, I don't. Besides, everything's being beamed back to Earth via the normal uplink. Or

it was before it was broken.' Four of the astronauts were looking angry and confused.

'How many cameras in total?' Lendal asked.

'Why don't you tell them, Mr Hu?' Sarah said.

Everyone looked at the young man

'One hundred and fifteen,' he admitted.

'You told me you were a showman.'

Lendal looked pale. 'You've been taping every intimate moment of our lives since we left?'

Warry was heading for the airlock door. 'We didn't leave, did we? This is a film set. I knew it! We've been on candid

camera for nearly a decade? Well, that's it. I'm going.'

Wait' Chang Hu said. 'No. We're really here.'

The Doctor looked over at the airlock door. 'It's a shame you weren't here to tell Barrett that. He found the Tri-V signal,

thought just what Warry did. That this was all a fake, that you were still on Earth.'

'The exploding console?'

'A feedback loop to the room where Chang Hu controls the Tri-V recording.' 'The what?' Warry asked.

'A secret compartment in the hold,' Chang Hu said. `We're really out here, Warry. Millions of miles out Look, how do you think

we paid for this? A twenty-year manned mission?'

'I thought it was your father's natural wit and charm.'

'It was. And his business sense. He needed a way to get people interested.'

Àstronauts washing?' Lendal growled.

`Yes. Everyone watches *The Edge of* Reality, all the time. They

know us better than they know their own friends. Their own

spouses. That time with you and Talbot in the greenhouse... wow. The ratings that night went through the roof.'

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Talbot and Lendal flushed.

Will they, won't they...? Oh, there they go. And keep going. Wow. When you get back to Earth, you'll have so much

modelling work that...'

'I'm a physicist,' Talbot complained.

Òne whose animposter is on the wall of every teenager's bedroom and whose agent signed a very lucrative contract

with a firm that makes bikini wax.' Àgent?' Lendal muttered.

Talbot, though, moved to hit him, forcing the Doctor to intervene. Ìs this even legal?' she shouted, as the

Doctor held her back.

`Which of the many law firms in the Kuiper Belt would you like to consult?' the Doctor asked reasonably.

`Why couldn't we have been told?'

`You're a physicist,' the Doctor said. 'So you know about the observer effect. The act of watching something *changes*

it.'

Ìf you knew the cameras were on you, you'd have been acting,' Chang Hu said.

`You've been acting, then,' Warty pointed out. 'You've been playing a part for nine years.'

Chang Hu's smile didn't crack for a moment. 'My father put me on global television when I was still in the womb. First

human being to leave the solar system, remember? What you see with me is what you get.'

`Now what?' Sarah said.

The shipmates looked at each other.

`We're famous?' Warry said.

`We're the greatest heroes of the century.'

Ànd you've travelled further than any other human being,' Sarah said, trying not to think too smugly about where

***she* had been. 'You want to talk about reality? You're really here in the Kipper Belt.'**

`Kuiper,' Duncan corrected her.

•

`You have real science to do,' the Doctor added.

`The Tri-V uplink is ready again,' Chang Hu said. 'We don't have to turn it back on. But it's important that people see

us. Human beings like them, on the edge of outer space.'

The Doctor grabbed Sarah's arm, leading her away. 'Well, that's clearly your decision. But you're making history here.

Well done. I think if your viewers saw Sarah and myself here it would qualify as... what's the expression?'

À continuity error?' Sarah asked.

Èxactly. And we can't have those. Now, we lead such uneventful lives, I

doubt anyone would want to tune in. But wouldn't you want to watch astronauts heading off into the final frontier instead,

given half the chance? Good luck, whatever you decide.'

He ushered Sarah out of the living module.

Sarah was feeling rather pleased with herself as she unlocked the TARDIS doors.

'I was right,' she said. 'I was the one that worked it all out this

time. And it was you barking up the wrong tree.'

The Doctor checked his pocket watch and sighed. Rh... it's May 2040. We were a little early for the giant bees. They find them

in August.'

'What?' Sarah snapped.

'Nothing... just something for Chang Hu and his crew to look forward to. It's a ratings smash.'

The Doctor looked up at the camera that was pointing at him.

'You should probably all stay tuned for that. They're marvellous.' The Doctor grinned as he stepped into the TARDIS.

Artificial Intelligence

Andy Campbell

By 2040, cognitive science had conquered all the major educational disorders. Reliable remedies were available for dyslexia by

2023, for dyspraxia by 2025, for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder by 2036, and for Asperger's Syndrome by 2038.

With these battles w 77

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, it was only a matter of time before researchers returned their attention to the old issue of artificial

intellectual enhancement. The neurochemists and psychosurgeons of 2040, unlike their predecessors, finally possessed

sufficient expertise to answer the question: how *clever is* it *possible* to *be?* But such lines of enquiry can lead in unexpected directions.

Saturday 24 March

I've never kept a diarey before. I don't know why their telling me to keep one now.

One of the research team, that cow Colman, just looked at me funny & said it would pass the time. Her eyes sort of

glittered when she said it. Well III do it then. It'll be something to do. Its that or check the internet, & there's

probably nothing interesting on it. Ill write down what's been happening to me but Ill tear it up before Colman sees it.

Ha! It'll be just for me. The Diarey of Imogen Quaye.

Well for a start, I don't like Colman. And I don't like that other one, the creepy prat with the glasses, Skinner. I don't

like the way he looks at Colman cos its obvious he fancys her. Cant she see it? Then there's the older guy, Bliss, he

doesn't seem too bad. And the boss of all 3 of them, professor Kelt, but I haven't seen him yet.

Anyway I'm stuck here in a little room in, what did they call it? Cant remember the name of the place. Since

yesterday when they brought me here & put me to sleep & did what they wanted to me. And now I'm sitting here like a

prat with a headache & no hair. They'll visit me from time to time they said, to check on my progress. That part I

understand okay. I'm not stupid. I'm their ginnea pig!

Sunday 25 March

Well at least my head feels better. Also I've remembered the name of this

place, the Lashley Institute it's called. Still don't know what they do here but

its big, laboratorys above ground and below & in the middle of it all there's

this one little bedroom for yours truly, done up all pink & fluffy with cushons and cuddly bunnies like I'm 6 instead of

x6.

Its so boring I actually look forward to the researchers visiting me in my room. Last time it was Skinner to ask me all

sorts of questions but I've never heard anything so pointless. One of them was London is to England as Paris is to

Blank. What's that supposed to mean? He seemed disappointed when I just looked at him. Later on Colman came with her

'digit span task' which was supposed to 'test the limits of my STM'. My score was 5 but Colman wouldn't tell me what this

meant, she just looked angry & stormed out.

I've got internet access in my room & I've been told to use it. Bliss that was. He told me I should read a book, sort of

peered in my eyes when he said it. What does he think I left school for? If I wanted books I would of stayed there. I

didn't even know there were books on line. I did look up the Lashley Institute on a search engine though. It said Pioneers

in Cerebral Enhancement, & there was a picture of a greasy wailnut. Gave up and looked at porn instead — no sites

forbidden — go girl!

So I still don't know what they want me for or how long their keeping me here. But I know I wont be missed cos my

parents aren't around to speak for me anymore, & my bitch aunt only cares about what she can pour out of a bottle. If

this lot went to my aunt and asked her for a ginnea pig, she would of been like, Here's my neice, help yourself. I was sick

of living with her anyway.

The internet site for the Lashley Institute has a Diary of Forthcoming Events. So I've been spelling diary wrong

haven't I? You learn something new every day.

Monday 26 *March*

Oh, I've got it, its France. 'London is to England as Paris is to France.' Ha!

Wednesday* 28 *March

I've been here for

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o nodn lsytubble on my head. I don't get headaches any more, and I find

I can think straight, which is nice — in fact its almost as if I never thought clearly in my life until I came here. I got a lot

more of Skinner's queSi

stions right this morning, and he seemed really pleased & rewarded me with some choclate — which

he told me to keep quiet about, cos strictly speaking its illegal — & recomended me to 'try reading Orwell'.

What's that? Anyway, the choclate was lovely.

Friday 3o March

about four hours a night and I feel absolutely fine — so with nothing much else to do, I've been reading quite a lot.

Orwell, and other people too. There's a cuddly toy pig in this room, and I've called it Snowball because I liked 'Animal

Farm'. I never used to enjoy books at school, but I've learned a fair bit. Like I've learned I can't spell! How

embarassing. Still, I'll probably destroy this diary anyway when I've finished with it.

Saturday 31 March

I feel different today — sort of bigger inside. It's not a bad feeling.

Next to my bedroom I have a little bathroom all to myself. With their mental picture of a typical sixteen-year-old girl, the

research team have stocked it with everything they think I'll need — face cream, foundation, lipstick, lip gloss, eyeliner, eye

shadow, mascara, make-up remover, tweezers, nail varnish, nail polish, talcum powder, deodorant and perfume (four

kinds), and a razor to shave my legs, plus all the usual basic toiletries — but I get the impression that the tampons

shoved on top of the bathroom cabinet were a bit of an afterthought. They've also provided shampoo, conditioner,

hairspray, a nice big blue brush, a hair dryer, and one of those programmable curling tong things, which I thought

was funny since they shaved off my hair when I got here. This morning I spent a long time in the bathroom, just gazing

at myself in the mirror. My eyes seemed much brighter than usual — the blue part looked pale, almost transparent.

This afternoon I discovered that I like Shakespeare, especially `Cymbeline'. That would have been hard for my English

teacher, Miss Rafferty, to predict a few months ago. I also had another look at the internet site for this institute. Their

main interest, they say, is 'cognitive enhancement through microscopic cerebral implants and acetylcholine therapy'. They

claim to have already cured Alzheimer's Disease in this way, but the research participants shown in their photographs were

mainly pigs and monkeys, not people.

When Bliss came to see me, I confronted him and asked him how long I'm going to be kept here. He looked

uncomfortable and told me that I could leave 'the project' at any time, but that he hoped I wouldn't. Well, I don't think

I will. I'm very comfortable here, I'm left in peace most of the time, and there's plenty to read. To be honest, this is the

best I've felt in years, and it's not as if I have anyone to go home to. I also asked Bliss what the purpose of the project is,

but he just answered: 'To make you better, Imogen.' I think I like him better than the others.

Anyway, STM stands for 'Short Term Memory', and my digit span is apparently fifteen and climbing. I've also

discovered that I'm quite good at mental arithmetic.

*** * ***

Monday 2 April

Today I read the following article in the 'On-line Journal of Cognitive Engineering':

The human nervous system contains between ten and twelve billion nerve cells, or neurons, each as individual

as a snowflake. About eighty per cent of neurons are found in the brain, and especially in the cerebral cortex, the

wrinkled outer layer of tissue, which is the location of all higher-level cognitive processing including memory,

language and problem-solving.

The neurons in the human brain are interconnected in a network of unbelievable complexity. Each one receives

electrochemical signals from nearby neurons through its many branches, known as dendrites, and in turn

transmits its own signals along its axon, a slender projection of protoplasm leading away from the

neuron and branching into synaptic buttons.

W it hi n the syna pti c bu tton s a re sto re d mol ec ul es of neurotransmitters, the chemical

messengers that underlie all advanced psychological processes, from recalling a telephone number to writing

an opera, from typing at a keyboard to falling in love.

Each electrochemical impulse arriving along the axon prompts a flurry of neurotransmitter molecules to

shower across the microscopic gap, or synapse, that separates the neuron from its neighbour, and to stimulate the

next neuron in

the chain. It will be seen, therefore, that all our thoughts and feelings have a physical reality at the

microscopic level.

More than forty different neurotransmitters have already been identified, each one generating its own

distinctive pattern of psychological effects at the synapse before being deactivated by specialist digestive

enzymes or reabsorbed into the transmitting neuron. The effect of any neurotransmitter at the synapse can

be artificially increased by reducing the potency of these digestive enzymes, or by inhibiting the process of

reabsorption, or both.

For example, the activity of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter important in human memory, can be

increased using specialist chemicals known as acetylcholinesterase inhibitors — especially galantamine —

which work against the enzymes that digest acetylcholine. Meanwhile acetylcholine 'reuptake inhibitors'

can be used to encourage acetylcholine molecules to remain active for longer periods at the synapse than they

otherwise would.

By these two means neurochemists have already consigned Alzheimer's Disease to history, and the

potential for memory enhancement in healthy individuals is a promising area for future neurochemical

research.

More stimulating still is the observation that the nine billion or so neurons in the human brain can theoretically

reconnect in a limitless number of combinations. The brain of one healthy human contains the potential to form

more neural connections than there are atoms in the observable universe.

Researchers have speculated that the processing capacity of the human brain could be artificially increased by

perhaps ten to the sixth power; others, still more optimistic, have not hesitated to dismiss this estimate as

conservative. By this reasoning, even well-known geniuses such as Einstein and Hawking would be considered pitiful

intellectual cripples by comparison with the potential latent in every human being.

So, the human brain typically performs at only a millionth of its capacity, does It? Well, that's something to think about.

While I was logged on, I also cracked Colman's area of the network. I guessed her password on my second

attempt: 'Stockholm'. My first (Incorrect) guess had been 'Nobel'. Some people are so superficial. These are the

opening lines of one of her files:

Project Golden Girl (initiated 23.3.40)

Lead Researcher: Prof. Donald Kelt

Associate Researchers: **Susan Colman, Michael Skinner, Eugen Bliss Test Subject: Imogen Kelly Quaye (born**

3.2.24)

Notes: **Both parents killed in skyway accident 20.12.36; no siblings; subject now resides with maternal aunt;**

school regards personality

as generally malleable, intellectual capacity moderate to low

(38% on Sternberg Index)

The file was editable, so I added my genus and species as well: Cavia porcellus. Guinea pig! I wonder if Colman will get the

joke.

***Wednesday* 4 April**

I didn't sleep at all last night; I found that I didn't need to. Actually, I feel ten times better without sleep. The eight hours I

could have wasted I spent speed-reading an on line encyclopaedia instead. The result was that I did well on Bliss's general

knowledge questionnaire this morning, or at least on the questions concerning topics from A to G. His excitement was

quite touching. In the afternoon I read Hemingway's For Whom *the* Bell Tolls, to commemorate the centenary of its

publication. That took ninety minutes, then I started learning Spanish. It's intoxicating. There are apparently five thousand

extant languages in the world, so I won't run out! Ha!

If I close my eyes I can see the photographs from the encyclopaedia, just as

clearly as if I were still looking at them — they're even in colour. If I can develop a comparable ability with actual pages of

text, I won't even have to memorise their content: I'll just be able to picture the words and read them off.

One curious thing is that I sometimes see an image in my head whose origin I can't account for: just one word, 'IS',

in big letters. What does it mean?

Thursday 5 April

Actually it's not 'IS'. It's the number '15'.

Friday 6 April

My STM capacity is now forty: that is to say, when Colman reads me *a* sequence of forty randomly selected digits, I

am able to repeat them straight back to her without error. She went white the first time I did that, which afforded

me a good deal of satisfaction. I also told her that in my view, Skinner would very much like to sleep with her. She glared

at me and said, 'who's a clever girl, then?' in an affectedly patronising voice. I suppose she knew about Skinner already.

Later I heard Colman and Skinner arguing in low voices near my room. But the argument wasn't about any amorous

designs he may have on her; it was about me. There was some indistinct muttering about 'right off the scale', then I

heard Colman hiss: 'How far can this be pushed?' And Skinner hissed back: 'Well, that's what we're here to find out,

isn't it, Susie?' The dispute ended amicably enough with an agreement that 'Donald' (meaning Professor Kelt)

wouldn't tolerate squeamishness in his *team.* I wonder what they meant by that.

Saturday *7* April

I never sleep any more, and I don't miss it in the slightest. I devote all my time to learning — well, I do still devote

about one per cent of it to chocolate. There's nothing I don't know about now, from Homeric poetry to the interior

workings of a stereograph player, from evolutionary theory to existentialism, from palaeontology to Perseus

conspiracy theories. The one thing I'm incapable of is finding any kind of information dull. I can now speak Spanish

fluently, and French and Russian tolerably. I can also beat the Korsakoff Program at chess, which I'm told no

grandmaster has done in fifteen years. Mate in twenty-two

moves. Ha!

This morning I had a bizarre experience during a test session with Colman. I suppose it was my own fault, but I do

find the woman unconscionably patronising. She had been treating me like an eight-year-old in *her* usual way, so I

responded with some scathing remark: 'answering back', she would

probably call it. Colman lost her temper and yelled at me, and at that moment the world shifted out of focus and I had a

sudden very clear picture of her face horribly stretched and deformed, the mouth growing huge and bristling with pointed

teeth, lurching towards me. Then reality snapped back into place.

'No need to bite my head off,' I told her, and she left, slamming the door.

Sunday 8 April

Today I read a parapsychology book entitled Telepathy: Past Myth, Future Science. It took me thirty-two minutes to read.

Then I read it for a second time, in twenty-seven minutes.

Telepathy: I like the sound of the word.

Monday 9 April

I'm mildly troubled by feelings of hostility towards my aunt.

I'm happy when I'm reading, because then I'm just concentrating on the information I'm absorbing; but sometimes

when I pause for a while, I see her sitting in that bulky brown twentieth-century armchair of hers, with her florid face

and greasy strands of hair hanging over her eyes, and a half-full (i.e. half empty) gin bottle grasped in one dangling

hand. She would gaze at me contemptuously and tell me to grow up, reminding me how stupid I am (`bloody

stupid', she preferred to say), and that I wouldn't amount to a thing unless I found myself a man who didn't object to

sex with stupid girls. She would go on to explain that she'd never got over her sister's death, but that the worst part of it

all was finding herself saddled with her sister's no-hoper of a daughter, an ungrateful teenager who depended on her for

every little thing. Every time she said something like that, I was forced to go through the whole tortuous process of

trying to convince myself that my aunt was the unreasonable one, and that I was the one who was in the right. It

wasn't always easy.

When I think about my aunt, I find that the image in my head doesn't just say '15' any more: it says '15 million

euros'. That's a large sum of money. But Its significance is quite lost on me for now, I'm afraid. Perhaps I need to think

about something else: there's certainly plenty of choice.

I wonder if the research team are nervous of me now that I'm manifestly cleverer than they are. Yes, I sense they

are: especially Colman. I hear a frightened little voice chattering away inside her head.

Tuesday 10 April

Last night I learned Mandarin Chinese in just under nine and a half hours.

This diary is only for me, so I won't try to be modest and pretend I'm not

fluent; I know that I am. So, I can now speak to a billion more people than I could yesterday.

For Whom the Bell Tolls now takes me eleven minutes to read. I've

timed myself.

I've also been doing a little research into Donald Kelt, the head of this project. A search of academic websites

indicates that a lot of information about his career has been deliberately suppressed, but from what I can gather he has

a chequered history, to say the least. The short version is that he's an eminent English academic, born 2000, obtained a

first-class honours degree in psychology from Oxford in 2021, returned as a postgraduate research assistant in their

Department of Psychiatry, and went on to become Head of Department; but he was ignominiously dismissed from that

post in 2035 for illicit experimentation into the effects of negative reinforcement on learning, which caused a well-

publicised clash between the university and various animal rights groups.

He is also the author of three controversial books on eugenics and behaviour control, and seems by most accounts

to hold views so venomously right-wing that Hitler would have found them distasteful. The academic community

continues to tolerate him because he's a genius: in fact, he makes the average genius seem educationally subnormal —

even his enemies are willing to concede that. So that is the man to whom Colman, Skinner and Bliss are answerable.

Thursday 12 April

Today I have been listening to music on the Net, and have developed a taste for Gilbert and Sullivan. I keep humming this,

from 'The Pirates of Penzance':

I am the very model *of a modern Major-General*

I've information vegetable, animal and mineral

I *know the kings of England* and I quote the fights historical

From Marathon to Waterloo in order categorical!

I can do that too!

And prime ministers and presidents, and capital cities and currencies, and sporting records and schools of

philosophical thought — and star charts and atomic weights and insect taxonomy and particle physics and analytical

epistemology!

I just smile at the researchers now. My mind contains theirs. I can read their minds now as easily as I can read my

computer screen.

I've memorised large parts of the Bible, the Talmud and the Koran. What a clever fellow God sounds. But

extrapolating from my recent progress, I'd say I have him in my sights.

Friday 13 April

Well, I've just read yesterday's entry, and needless to say it makes me sound like a complete megalomaniac Get a

grip on yourself, Imogen! How embarrassing. Where's the chocolate?

Saturday 14 April

A disadvantage of never sleeping is that I don't dream, but this is to a great extent offset by my ability to think and

visualise infinitely more clearly than I could in my former life. I find it a special comfort to think about my mother; one

early memory strikes me as particularly telling. We were out shopping one day when I was four years old, and my mum

wanted to buy me a 8

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ook as a present: fairy stories or something. But I protested that I

didn't like reading, so she

bought me a colouring book instead, which I loved.

I don't suppose that's much of an anecdote, really — not even worth recording in a private diary. But to me it

summarises my mother — she didn't impose her idea of a suitable gift on me, she was happy to let me choose my own. I

get a bit tearful when I think about that.

Sunday 15 April

This has been a bad day.

I have now cracked all three researchers' passwords for the computer network. Skinner's took the longest — it was

a numerical sequence based on the derived cube roots of imaginary numbers, but I cracked it after a few seconds. On

his area of the network (concealed beneath a few layers of fairly juvenile encryption), I have been able to read more detail

about the purpose of this project, and I think it's fair to say that its primary aim is not to help me appreciate Shakespeare.

These days government biochemists can genetically engineer soldiers who are tougher than any the world has ever

seen: combat troops who don't get tired, don't get cold, don't even feel pain. Where military technology has so far

lagged behind is in its failure to produce more efficient directing brains to mastermind the military campaigns. So that's

what I'm here for — they want to know how to make a cleverer field marshal, some ultra-bright spark to sit behind the

lines and tell the thugs which way to point their guns. A 'classified military application of experimental psychology', they

call it.

I also know what '15 million euros' means. I'd rather I didn't, but knowledge once acquired can't be unlearned.

15 million euros is what my aunt sold me for. Sold me to the research team, no questions asked. That should keep her

in gin for a while. Perhaps she'll even invest in some tonic to go with it.

Incidentally, there is a photograph of Donald Kelt on the website of the National League for Animal Freedom. His

mouth is smiling, but his green eyes look cold and dead. Underneath the picture in capital letters is the slogan:

'WANTED FOR TORTURE.'

Monday 16 April

I'm not proud of what I did to Skinner, but I had to put all this anger somewhere.

I've been inside his mind for a while now, and I've learned that when he was a boy he was routinely beaten up by his

father. Last night he left the Institute and was asleep by midnight as usual; but in my mind I went nosing through the

streets and houses until I found him in his bed. I pressed my way into his skull and gave him the most terrible

nightmare of his life: his father, thuggish, seven feet tall and more muscular than he had ever been, his fists clenched

and his slack mouth yelling abuse, chasing little Mike Skinner through the long dusty corridors of his childhood

home. When I finally let Skinner wake up, he couldn't stop screaming.

I won't attempt to deny responsibility. But the man was a clinician. He should have known that taking so many

sleeping pills was dangerous.

Friday 20 April

I'm still growing. Colman has assessed my STM capacity as two hundred and forty, and I expect her to give up trying to

test it now, as it is just too time-consuming. I can speak forty-five languages, with a receptive vocabulary of no fewer than

fifteen thousand words in each. My newest is Japanese, which I learned this morning in seventy-four minutes. I know

all thirty-seven of Shakespeare's plays by heart, and over eighty thousand poems. I can also describe the interior

workings of every important technical device invented since 1900. *For* Whom *the* Bell Tolls now takes me four minutes to

read.

It was extremely portentous of me earlier to compare myself to God, but it does seem fair to say that certain

philosophical issues will need to be addressed if I continue to develop cognitively at an exponential rate. Logic dictates

that there must be only a finite amount of human knowledge, and extrapolating from my current rate of mental growth,

I calculate that I should have absorbed all of it within eight to ten years. What will that turn me into?

Colman and Bliss didn't connect me with Skinner's suicide. In their minds I found no suspicion toward me — only

curiosity and fear, with the latter emotion rapidly gaining ascendancy over the former. It appears they haven't even

considered the possibility that the treatments I underwent could have given rise to a telepathic faculty as a side effect.

They're behaviourists at heart, and in their own minds they probably relegated such issues as 'telepathy' and

'telekinesis' to the realms of parapsychology when they were still undergraduates, where they could be comfortably

ignored. Nevertheless, I know every thought they have.

This afternoon, during an interview with Colman, I gave her the opportunity to be honest with me about the purpose of

this project. Her mind smells so badly of deceit that I'm becoming reluctant to let her into my room, but I thought I would give

her one last chance to come clean. I asked her outright why the European government should be so keen to finance an

investigation into mental enhancement. I even tried to help her by hinting at possible military applications of the findings. But

she made the decision to Be: she actually expected me to believe that this whole project is intended to benefit the academic

performance of teenagers such as myself.

She must think I'm stupid.

I don't like that.

Saturday 21 April

I learned an interesting biographical detail about Susan Colman when I read her mind the other day. At the age of nineteen, in

2032, she was studying at Warwick and was one of their most promising psychology undergraduates. She fell in love with a

geology major called Dave Reber, whose brown eyes she very much liked. She became pregnant with his child, but terminated

the pregnancy rather than compromise her university career. Reber never knew.

Last night, without leaving my bed, I went to visit Colman in hers. I slipped inside her head and made her dream about a small

sunlit room, and inside it, twenty-year-old Susan Colman breastfeeding her little baby girl. When Colman woke up she went to the

bathroom, and cut both her wrists so deeply that her radius and ulna bones could be clearly seen by the maid who found her.

She made a choice when she was nineteen, but she never got over the guilt. So she wasn't a monster after all.

But I am. And I'm not even sure I dislike it.

Sunday 22 April

I'm calling off the project. Someone should have told these people that guinea pigs can bite.

I feel sorry for Bliss, but he was a loose end. Last night I made him dream about the one thing he couldn't face. I shared his

dream vicariously, though of course I was wide awake. I let his unconscious mind direct the manifest content, and initially I

was puzzled by it. He simply dreamed that he walked Into a bedroom with a big double bed, and picked up a paperback novel

from the bedside cabinet. The novel had two bookmarks inserted into it at slightly different places. He woke up abruptly, as if

he had had the most terrible

nightmare. There was a shotgun in his attic, and when he pulled the trigger I felt his brain switch off, leaving only

blackness.

It took me a few seconds to deduce the significance of the dream imagery. Bliss's wife divorced him; his obsessive

attitude towards his work as an experimental psychologist left no time for a romantic relationship, or at least not one

that was sufficiently fulfilling for her. He regretted the loss once she had left, and never recovered from the rejection. It

wasn't so much that she left him: it was that he realised too late that he could have prevented it. The paperback novel, I

suppose, represented the intimacy he had thrown away: when he and his wife were together it was their habit to read

the same books, so that they could compare notes on them; and the two bookmarks indicated where each of them was up

to.

I wonder how Kelt will respond when he realises that his team

have stopped reporting back to him.

Monday 23 April

Last night my aunt had a peculiar dream. She dreamed that she sold her niece to a research project for 3o million

euros. When she woke up, she knew exactly what the dream meant. This project is extremely well funded: she could

easily have held out for twice as much as she got.

Acute alcohol poisoning is a terrible thing. Her liver shut down at four seventeen this afternoon.

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Tuesday 24 April

I'm alone now — unless you count the finest minds of history, digitally accessible. There must be hundreds of other

people working in this institute, but my room's in a high-security area, so I don't expect to meet any of them.

My aunt used to say that my only hope of happiness was to find a man cleverer than myself. Ironically, that is

starting to sound quite appealing; it would be nice to be understood at least once before I take my life. Regrettably, however,

no such man exists.

Wednesday 25 April

This morning I spent a long time standing in front of the bathroom mirror, staring into my own eyes. The irises were the

clearest and brightest blue I had ever seen. I wondered whether pretty eyes were a foreseen side effect of the process, or

just another of its surprises.

Historical records indicate at least two hundred distinct methods

of suicide, but I realised that only a small minority of

them were available to me, confined to my two little rooms. After a short period of consideration I took the razor

that I had been given to shave my legs, snapped the blade free of its plastic housing and raised it to my throat. I pushed

the blade a little way into my neck, just above the clavicle on the left side. I was surprised and rather sickened to

notice that slicing the skin made a discernible sound. The pain was startling, and I stopped, watching the trickle of blood

snake down my left breast, and thinking: So that's what a *genius's blood looks like.* It wasn't fluorescent, it wasn't

multicoloured, and it didn't detach itself to float in magical blobs in the air like an astronaut's coffee in zero gravity: it

was just dark and red, smelling of vulnerability, the smell of nosebleeds and periods, sweet and sticky and depressingly

unsurprising. To spare myself further pain, I mentally reached inside and switched off the afferent neurons in the

region of my neck, then braced myself for one long terminal cut.

Then I faltered, frowning at my reflection. A peculiar sound was erupting from the adjoining bedroom, swelling in

volume by the second. I listened, gripping the razor blade, involuntarily analysing the sound for intensity, amplitude,

wavelength, purity and pitch. I had sampled hundreds of thousands of sounds on the internet, but this matched

none of *them;* its Closest resemblance seemed to be to the pain-cry of an African bull elephant, recorded and played several

times through a synthesiser, and terminating in a nondescript crunch.

Still holding the blade, I went into the bedroom and saw what was standing there. It was a dark blue cuboid, two point

seven four metres tall, apparently weather-beaten, crowned by a

cylindrical lamp, which fitted beneath my pink-papered

bedroom ceiling with no more than an inch to spare. Whatever difficult questions the observation might raise, I

recognised the object as a metropolitan police telephone box of the kind introduced in Newcastle in 1929 and used

extensively in London between the 1930s and the 1960s. On a panel on its left door, printed white on blue, was the

message of reassurance that I had already read in an on-line history of twentieth-century London and Could have quoted

from memory:

Police telephone. Free for use of **public. Advice and assistance obtainable immediately.** ***Miters*** **and cars respond to urgent calls. Pull to open.**

Doubtless I should have been primarily concerned with evaluating possible explanations for this surreal intrusion, but my

initial response was emotional rather than analytical. Instead of calculating probabilities, my mind would only scream: ***I***

need some advice! **I** ***need some assistance! Immediately, please' How's*** **this for an urgent call: help! Help! Help!**

A little sob caught in my throat. Predictably, I realised, schizophrenia had come to visit me, bringing visual

hallucinations that ***were*** **indistinguishable from reality. There had been a time when psychologists characterised**

schizophrenia as an escape from an intolerable world; what more natural hallucination for me, in the depths of my

despair, than this symbol of order with its authoritative promise of salvation in neat white capital letters?

`Damn you for not being real!' I yelled, and raised the blade to my throat again, suddenly sick to the heart of reality,

and sick of procrastination; and at that moment one of the police box's doors abruptly folded inwards and its occupant

emerged cautiously into the room.

He was a nice-looking blond man, dressed for cricket. With one cold part of my mind I thought: That's a *clever* trick. Let's

***see* how *clever* you real y are. *Answer me* one question correctly and *I won't give you* bad dreams. I opened my mouth to ask some technical question on comparative genetics, but then the man said `hello!' with such obvious enthusiasm that I lost**

track of what I was going to say, and heard myself asking instead: 'Do you have any chocolate?'

For a moment the man looked puzzled. Then, apparently with a flash of inspiration, he reached into one of the inside

pockets of his long, fawn coat and produced a squashed-looking chocolate bar. He handed it over to me without a

word, and in the same action somehow spirited the razor blade out of my hand.

I looked at the chocolate bar. The list of ingredients on the wrapper was frankly alarming: virtually no nutritional

value, and at least half the ingredients were synthetic additives that had been illegal for years. 'Where did you get

this?' I asked.

Àbout sixty years ago,' the man said, standing at my shoulder to peer at the label. 'But don't worry, it's only a few

days old.'

'I'm not sure I understand,' I said.

The man smiled. 'Don't worry. You don't have to understand to enjoy the chocolate. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm

the Doctor.'

'That's good,' I said. 'I need a doctor. I'm Imogen Quaye.'

The Doctor, who had turned away for a moment to peer curiously

around the pink walls of my room, turned back to

me with a grin and extended his hand in a theatrically gallant handshake. 'Really? I'm delighted to meet you, Imogen,'

he said earnestly.

`You're allergic to praxis gases,' I said.

'What?'

I pointed to his left lapel. 'Celery turns purple in the presence of certain praxis gases. It's to warn you, isn't it? I can't

think of any other reason for fastening a stick of celery to your coat.'

The Doctor stared at me for a while, his expression more concerned than impressed. 'Oh, dear,' he said at last.

'You do realise that the chemical effect would still work if you just carried the celery in your inside pocket,' I said.

The Doctor frowned, then slowly reached out his index finger to touch the tiny scar at my hairline. 'Perhaps you should

explain to me exactly what's been going on here, Imogen.'

I trusted him, or at least I badly wanted to; either way the result was that I let him read my diary, up to and including

yesterday's entry. While I sat quietly

on the bed and ate my Mars bar — by far the most delicious chocolate I had ever tasted — the Doctor sat on my woven cane

chair and read the entire diary without comment, occasionally wrinkling his brow in concern and passing his fingers

through his blond hair in an absent-minded gesture. When he had finished, he looked up into my eyes. 'I see,' he said,

carefully enunciating the two simple words.

'Now you know who I am,' I said. 'The psychologists' monster.'

'Oh, I don't know,' the Doctor replied breezily. '"Monster" is

rather a strong word.'

'It's the right one,' I said. 'Trust me, I've the whole of *Roget's* Thesaurus to choose from. I know it must come as a

shock to you. I don't suppose you've set a monster before.'

'Well...'

'Four people have died already,' I reminded him.

The Doctor gently touched the drying trickle of blood on my neck. 'And you thought you'd solve everything by adding a

fifth?'

Ìt's either me or an indefinite number of other people,' I said. 'I have to see it through, Doctor. But there is one thing

you can do for me first.'

'Certainly.'

Ì'd like to know who you are,' I said. 'I can do it quickly. You don't have to say anything.'

'Very well,' the Doctor replied. 'Just be careful in there, Imogen. Don't be .gone too long.'

Without standing up from the bed, I reached my mind into his. The shallows inside were warm and comforting. I

detected:

Love *tea. Lovely* mug *of hot tea,* ful *cream* milk and plenty *of sugar. Clouds* of *sweet.* smeling *steam bil owing over the mug. Nothing*

***like a lovely* mug of hot tea to revitalise the tired mind.**

I took another pace inside, and detected:

Love cricket. *Now the*93

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e's a pastime for a *gentleman. Resounding* crack of wil ow on bather. *Cheers of surprise* and *delight* on *an English*

spring morning. Triumphant *reliving* of the *victory over cucumber sandwiches.*

I took one more pace inside, and the tsunami struck. I lost my footing and abruptly felt myself dwindle to a floating

microbe, a mote of dust adrift and spinning in *an* infinite chamber of darkness and light, filled with impossible visions.

Extremes of terror and beauty, evil and heroism, and every shade in ,between. Undreamed-of places, surreal events,

every conceivable species of—

My mind collapsed back into my head, the momentum sending my body sprawling back across the pink duvet. I

sat up slowly, panting, looking -gingerly at the Doctor.

'Sorry about that,' he said with a guilty smile. 'You'll be all right in a moment.'

immediately tried to rationalise, thinking:

He's a storytel er. Some kind *of writer.* I've visited the domain of a tirelessly *creative* imagination *and* it took me by surprise, that's all.

He makes up stories for children. Monsters and spaceships.

And then a second thought, irresistibly persuasive, permanently displacing the first:

It's all true.

À hundred billion stars in our galaxy,' I quoted breathlessly. `This could mean a trillion planets. Easily enough space

to accommodate ten billion independently evolved intelligent life forms. In a normal lifetime there wouldn't even be

time to name them. A hundred billion galaxies in the observable universe. An infinitude of potential alternatives

beyond it —'

Ìt's all right,' said the Doctor. `There's nothing to be afraid of.'

`You're an alien,' I breathed.

Ìndeed.'

`Why did you come to Earth?' I asked, feeling assailed by a growing sense of unreality.

Òh, I spend a good deal of my time here. On this occasion, however, my ship made the decision for me. The TARDIS

is a highly intelligent organism in her own right. I think she detected you from a long way away — perceived a mind

comparable in power to her own, and homed in on it. Rather like a bird responding to a mating call.'

Ì thought it couldn't be a metropolitan police telephone box,' I said.

Òh, not for one moment,' said the Doctor. 'Unlike a police box, the TARDIS has a mind all of her own. But there

is serendipity to consider. I'm sure you see what I mean.'

`Serendipity,' I echoed. 'A happy accident. A noun invented by Horace Walpole for The *Three* Princes of Serendip in

17542

`Quite right,' said the Doctor cautiously.

`So, the TARDIS brought you here for her own obscure reason, but as a result you happen to arrive just in time to

rescue me from self-destruction.' The thought had occurred to me, yes.'

I gazed into the Doctor's eyes, and saw that he meant it. Despite having read my diary, with its sordid account of the

four deaths, which had beep my idea and my responsibility, he still believed he could save me from myself. His buoyancy

and his idealism were actually unfeigned; he had experienced more than Colman, Bliss and Skinner combined, and

emerged from his adventures less cynical than any of them. The right thing would be to let him down gently, I decided.

`You're a good man, Doctor,' I said. `But you can't save everyone.'

`Yes, I know,' he replied gravely. I looked at him curiously, disconcerted by his sudden solemnity; clearly he was

referring to some personal memory of which I was unaware. 'Listen, Imogen,' he said. 'You're not any kind of

monster: you don't fit the profile. I think it's important for you to reconsider

your plans.' Lowering his gaze, he added sourly: 'I've had all I can stomach of teenage deaths.'

I wondered who the teenager had been, but out of regard for the Doctor's privacy I did not go into his mind to look.

Ì'm sorry, Doctor,' I said. 'I'm afraid it won't be possible for you to dissuade me. To do that, you would have to

have some argument against suicide that I haven't already considered. But I already analysed every conceivable

argument and counterargument on the subject before you arrived, and concluded that suicide is the correct option

for me. If you're expecting some kind of debate, you should banish the idea from your mind. I conducted the entire debate

with myself this morning and resolved it beyond the possibility of further discussion. Every word you're about to say,

I'm Certain to have said to myself.'

`When you're t

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y-one you get drunk on holiday in Tuscany,' said the Doctor. 'You

dance in a public fountain in a

town square in Florence, and laugh about it the next day with your friends. The joke is that being able to list all thèconstituent

chemicals in alcohol does nothing to obviate its psychoactive effects. But you never do find that shoe that comes off in the

water.'

`You can't stop me, Doctor,' I said.

`When you're twenty-seven you meet a wonderful man. You make love with him, and the following morning, while

drinking the freshly ground coffee he prepares for you, you decide to reject the Darwinian notion that love is a

biochemical illusion evolved to perpetuate the human species.'

Ì'm sorry, Doctor,' I said. 'You're wasting your time.'

`When you're thirty-four you read the best novel you ever read, and wonder how you ever lived without it. You travel

to Japan to meet its author, and the two ofyou have dinner together. You discuss her next book while watching the sun

setting on Tokyo harbour. You discover you like sushi.'

`You've seen all this?' I asked.

`No, of course not. I'm only guessing at future possibilities. You can guess at them for yourself. I just want to be sure

that you've truly considered all the tamifications of suicide. You can do a lot of damage with a razor blade, Imogen.

Wipe out eighty years of potential future experience. Execute all your descendants.'

`You think I haven't considered that?'

`No more sunsets, Imogen. No more gardens. No more books.'

`You can't sway me with emotional appeals, Doctor. This isn't an emotional decision, it's a pragmatic one.'

`No more chocolate.'

I grinned at him despite myself. 'Now you're being cruel.'

The Doctor rubbed his chin. 'What makes you sure you'll kill again?' Ì've done it before.'

'And everything you've done before, you're obliged to do again?'

'Well,' I said, 'that's the central issue, isn't it? I can't be sure I'll be able to control myself. I killed those people in

anger. There's no means of guaranteeing I won't become angry again, is there?'

'No, there isn't,' the Doctor replied. 'But you can decide how you act on your emotions. Why shouldn't you? No one

lives inside your head except you. No one else can override the resolutions you make about your own behaviour. You can

decide today to refrain permanently from violence, regardless ofwhat emotions you may or may not feel in the future. You

and I both know you're intelligent enough to do that. I discovered a long time ago that free will is not an illusion.'

'What if I make the resolution and then break it? You can't predict what I'll be like when I'm thirty years old, or forty.

You can't even make comparable predictions for yourself, Doctor. For all you know, in the future you could change into

a completely different person.'

'That's true,' the Doctor said. 'But doesn't the core of the personality remain unchanged and predictable,

regardless of more superficial changes?'

I considered this for a moment. 'I don't know,' I conceded. 'Psychological opinion is divided on the issue of constancy

of personality traits.'

'So why did you decide to take your own life?'

'I told you why.'

'Tell me again.'

'Because I can't risk killing anybody else. Because I've turned into something terrible, and it has to stop here.'

'Do you think for one moment that an indiscriminate murderer would reason like that, Imogen? The moral sense

that suggested suicide is an inviolate part of yourself. If you believe that killing other people is wrong, everything else

follows. Tell me, would you recommend suicide to another sixteen-year-old girl in your position?'

Here I faltered. A moment earlier I had known I was right. I was more intelligent than the Doctor, but perhaps not

by such a wide margin. I was reminded of my battles against the internet chess program, and the transient moments of

alarm when defeat had seemed possible. A discussion, I perceived, is analogous to a chess game: there is not

enough ,processing power in the universe to predict every possible move.

'And your mental power, Imogen — something quite new in the history of your species. Think of all you could do with

it.'

'Look at how I obta 96

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ined it,' I countered bitterly.

'That's irrelevant,' said the Doctor. 'Why should the means by which you've acquired your intelligence prevent you

from using it for other people's benefit? That's like saying it's impossible to give stolen money to charity. You can't

control your past, but you can have a say in your future. Unless...'

'Unless I kill myself,' I completed.

The Doctor nodded. 'Because then you permanently renounce all possibility

of influence,' he said. 'You obliterate all future decision-making power, and let oblivion replace you. All the algebra in

the world can't prove that nonexistence is preferable to self-direction. You must know that.'

`Next you're going to tell me suicide is a coward's way out.'

Òf course not. Suicide requires enormous courage, but it doesn't follow that it's a sensible thing to do. You've

placed your faith in logic, and if you act on that, the result will be a teenage girl lying in a pool of blood. Can you be

absolutely sure that that isn't absurd?'

`You're just playing with words, Doctor,' I said.

`Can you be absolutely sure?' the Doctor repeated.

I frowned and shook my head: not as a reply, just to clear it. Probably I should kill myself, I thought; but what if

the Doctor's arguments were sufficient to introduce an element of doubt? I got up from my bed and strolled *across to the

TARDIS, gazing absent-mindedly at the message printed on its door-panel. 'Why should it matter to you anyway?' I asked,

rather coldly, and suddenly realised that I was hoping with all my heart that the Doctor would not regard the question

as rhetorical.

`You're not the only one who's been learning a lot recently, Imogen,' the Doctor said. 'I've been learning you can't

necessarily expect to win just by doing the right thing. Ifyou're facing the wrong kind of enemy, even your own decency can

be turned into a weakness. Sentiment and loyalty may sound praiseworthy in principle, but ruthless logic can turn them

against you; and then someone you love is dead, and there's no going back on it.'

`So, you don't always win,' I said.

`No, I don't; at least not any more. It's very important that you understand that. To take just one example: not long

ago I visited a most peculiar school. The boys there were unbelievably clever, although still not quite in your league, I

might add. They'll be there for ever. *For ever,* Imogen. I was able to help them with one especially urgent problem, but in

the end I couldn't really save them, and they understand that every bit as well as I do.'

Advice and assistance obtainable immediately, I read again. I turned back to look at the Doctor. 'So, that's what this is

for? To compensate for your past compromises?'

`No, Imogen,' the Doctor said. 'That's my point. This has nothing to do with anyone else. This is about you.'

This, more than anything else the Doctor could have said, was what I had wanted to hear. Into my mind, without

apparent relevance, swam the image of ray mother pressing a colouring book into my four-year-old hands. The

Doctor was producing the bloodstained razor blade from somewhere within his coat. 'Well, now,' he said, holding it

out. 'If you're absolutely sure.'

I reached out to take the blade, then watched my hand hesitate in the air, trembling. When, after many seconds, I had

failed to take hold of the blade, the Doctor returned it to his pocket.

Ì don't know what to do,' I confessed.

Ìndecision is a privilege of the sophisticated mind,' said the Doctor, and then undermined the truism with a boyish

grin; at which moment my bedroom door burst inwards with a deafening crash, and a heavy machine gun, swollen to

ludicrous proportions like a boy's drawing of a gun, came nosing into my bedroom. It was followed into the room by a

uniformed thug whose hypertrophied muscles were presumably necessary just to keep the weapon level. Hovering in

the doorway behind him was a smaller man, dressed in an immaculate pin-striped suit, his face instantly recognisable

from the photograph I had seen on the internet: Professor Donald Kelt, in the flesh.

The Doctor rose to his feet to confront the two intruders, looking more resolute and less intimidated by the machine

gun than might have been expected. Without standing up from my bed, I pressed myself quickly inside the security

guard's skull to see what was there. I saw the man as he had been at about the age of twelve, dressed in a school

uniform instead of a military one, pushing a thin boy roughly against a classroom wall and spitting into his face. In the

intervening twenty years of his life there had not been much development, I perceived. I saw the need to get the man

out of the room quickly, but in light of my conversation with the Doctor I resolved to be careful, to be sure not to do

him any permanent psychological damage. I turned to stare at the guard, and instead of my own face I showed him

that of a gorgon, slippery green snakes writhing in place of hair, the mouth stretched into a grin of vile hunger. The

guard withdrew with a ghastly yell of superstitious terror and thumped away down the corridor outside, taking the

gun with him. His companion watched the retreat with mild

disdain but little surprise.

`Hello, Professor,' I said. 'You'd better come in.'

`Hello, Imogen,' said Kelt urbanely. 'I'm very pleased to meet you at last.' He closed the door behind him and came into

the bedroom. For a moment he appeared disconcerted at the sight of the Doctor and the TARDIS, then quickly got a grip

of himself. No doubt he had attempted, prior to this visit, to prepare himself for anything; he would already have worked

out that I had used telepathy to dispatch his team, and was possibly now reasoning that the Doctor and his ship were

just more of my illusions, perhaps even the tangible products of some nascent telekinetic faculty. In any case, he

evidently considered it prudent not to query their presence.

`This is the Doctor,' I said, getting up. 'Doctor, this is Professor Kelt.'

Kelt extended his hand and the Doctor shook it, but his eyes never left Kelt's face. 'How do you do, Professor,' he said

cautiously. The coolness of the greeting contrasted noticeably with the cheery enthusiasm with which the Doctor had

first hailed me.

Ì trust your time at the Lashley Institute hasn't been too disagreeable,' Kelt said to me. 'I think you know why I'm

here.'

'I'm sorry about your co-workers,' I said. 'Seriously. I didn't intend things to turn out the way they did.'

'I know that,' Kelt said gently. 'The treatment was — well, possibly overdone. You shouldn't blame yourself.'

'Excuse me,' the Doctor interrupted. 'If you don't mind my asking, is it standard research procedure to bring a

guard with a machine gun when visiting a sixteen-year-old girl?'

'No, it isn't,' Kelt replied. 'That was just a precaution. Three valued members of my research staff have recently

died. I had to consider my own safety, you understand.' He turned to me. 'Forgive my candour, Imogen, but there was

no telling how unstable you might have become.' He sat down on the bed and absent-mindedly picked up my cuddly

toy pig, Snowball, and started to stroke him.

'You've come here in person to close down the project,' I said.

'Not exactly,' Kelt said, 'but I do want to bring it to a kind of close. There are certain tests I need you to undergo.'

'Don't tell me,' I said. '"Peter is three times as old as Paul was when Peter was twice as old as Paul is now. How old is

Paul?"'

'Not that kind of test,' Kelt replied patiently. 'A number of — surgical tests. Nothing dangerous. We just need a check

on the cerebral implants, and a closer look at how your cholinergic synapses are behaving.' He offered a little smile of

reassurance.

'I don't want any more surgery,' I said.

Kelt looked up at the Doctor as if appealing for the support of another adult, but the Doctor met his gaze stony-faced.

'I don't want to harm you, Imogen,' Kelt said. 'You're far too valuable for that. Being a scientist doesn't stop me

being human, you know. I regard life as precious, more important than just acquiring knowledge.'

'That's not what your publicity says,' I remarked.

'What do you mean?' the Doctor asked.

'You should be intelligent enough by now to know propaganda when you see it,' said Kelt with a trace of irritation.

'Apparently he made his name at Oxford by electrocuting rhesus monkeys in order to make an obscure point about

operant conditioning,' I told the Doctor.

'Some highly inflammatory remarks were made about that,' said Kelt. 'The matter was blown up out of all

proportion.'

'Really?' I said. 'Then there was that study of acute stress responses in kittens. I thought that was some kind of sick

joke, until I cross-checked it on four other sites.'

'Let's not waste time, please,' Kelt said.

'I've learned a great deal by reading about your work, Professor,' I said. 'Here's an interesting one: sleep-deprived

rabbits expire after twenty-five days, without any identifiable physiological cause.'

Kelt rose to his feet. He was still holding Snowball. In a gesture that struck me as remarkable, because it was

obviously unconscious, he had fastened his hands tightly around the toy pig's fat pink neck.

`How do you feel about guinea pigs?' I asked him

Kelt lost his temper. 'Grow up, Imogen,' he said. It was true, I realised: his green eyes did look dead. His photograph

had done him no injustice; it had captured him perfectly.

`Did you feel justified in generalising from non-human mammals to humans) You truly regard different

mammalian species as psychologically analogous?'

`My strong advice,' said the Doctor very carefully to Kelt, 'is to stop this conversation now.'

A little sneer twisted the side of Kelt's mouth. 'Psychologically

analogous?' he said. 'Here's an analogy for you,

Imogen. Let's see if you can understand it.'

`Did you hear what I said?' asked the Doctor.

`You'll like this,' Kelt said, ignoring him. 'Once upon a time, a man has a nice house. But it's got a horrible lavatory

in it. I mean, really foul — filthy, stinking, a real embarrassment when guests come to visit. The man realises he has to

do something about it. So what does he do? Of course, he could clean it out, scrub the floors, spray air-freshener all over

the place; but he doesn't. What he does instead is to fill his lavatory with books. Floor to ceiling —beautiful hard-

backed books on every subject, from geometry to literature, history to physics, the whole of human knowledge. Now you

answer me this, Imogen, because I know you're a clever girl: what exactly does the man end up with? A library which all his

friends will want to visit, or a stinking, disgusting lavatory with books in it?'

`That's enough,' said the Doctor.

`Do you understand that analogy, Imogen?' Kelt said, staring straight into my eyes.

`You're in a lot of danger,' the Doctor said quietly.

Ì've already said I'm not going to hurt her,' Kelt snapped.

Ì wasn't talking to Imogen,' said the Doctor.

Ìt didn't have to be like this,' Kelt said to me in exasperation. 'You could have cooperated, but instead you're

going to make coercion necessary. Nothing's ever straightforward, is it?'

`How exactly are you going to coerce me, Professor?' I asked. 'I'm not the girl you bought a month ago.'

`Don't push me, Imogen,' Kelt said. 'All I want is to conduct a few harmless tests, but if you really insist on being

obstructive, you may as well know I have recourse to some very serious sanctions.'

`Do go on,' I said. I tried to sound nonchalant, but suddenly I felt terrified.

`Very well,' Kelt said. He spread his hands expansively, as if lecturing an

attentive group of undergraduate students. 'A small adjustment to the dopamine receptors in your brain and I

could give you schizophrenia. Permanently. How would you like a taste of real insanity? You might even like it, some

say it's a liberation.'

I looked inside Kelt's mind and saw that he meant it. While I was in there I discovered something else as well, or rather

the absence of something: no conscience, no capacity for guilt. Kelt was not made in the same way as his late

colleagues. In ten years of long nights I could never have given this man the dream that would have destroyed him, even

if I had wanted to; he was a stranger to remorse, or to any kind of regret.

'A few judicious strokes of the scalpel and I could make your whole central nervous system unresponsive to serotonin,'

Kelt was explaining. 'How about a lifetime of acute depression? Don't worry, you'd be no danger to yourself once the

four-point restraints were tied and buckled.'

In spite of myself, I felt tears pricking at my eyes. The Doctor laid his hand on Kelt's upper arm, but Kelt brushed it

away impatiently. 'You've no idea what you're doing,' the Doctor told him.

'Or how about Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?' Kelt continued,

ignoring the Doctor. 'Now there's an interesting

one. Pure hell, all neatly contained Inside one skull. Inducing it deliberately would be child's play. Do you think my

grasp of neurochemistry is unequal to that?'

'Stop,' I said, and this time I could not prevent my voice from shaking.

'Or a nice little self-harming habit I see you've made a start already. Or Anorexia Nervosa. No one would ever call

you chubby again. Or Bulimia — oh, I think you'd look lovely with two fingers down your throat, coughing into the toilet

bowl, with your cheeks burning and your eyes streaming with tears. Of course the gastric acid plays havoc with your

dental enamel, but what a sublime sense of control!'

'You're not human,' I said.

`No, Imogen, it's not that I'm just bored, that's all. You really think you're the golden girl because you can read

Latin and identify half a million species of wild flower? There's nothing worthwhile in you that I didn't put there. If

this project hadn't saved you from a life of mediocrity, you'd be the same empty-headed little slut we took off your

aunt's hands. Oh, don't look at me like that Underneath that fancy vocabulary I'm guessing you're still as dense m the

day we found you.'

'Don't,' I said.

Kelt grimaced with disgust. 'Stupid little girl,' he said, as if in wonderment.

I flew at him. Not physically; my body stayed exactly where it

was. While I stood and trembled, my mind tore free of

my skull and surged across the space that separated me from Kelt For five breathless seconds outside myself; I felt

transformed into pure fury; I experienced myself as a blizzard ofwhirling claws, tearing into every part of his body at

once. Then I collapsed back into

my own body and saw that he was still standing there unharmed, the sneer of contempt intact on his face.

I looked across at the Doctor, but his expression was unreadable. Then I turned to look again at Kelt. Something

about his appearance seemed to have subtly altered. For many seconds I waited for him to speak or move, but he was as

silent and immobile as a statue Finally I crept across the short distance between us, and peered into his unblinking eyes. A

curious change had taken place in him: it appeared to me that an intricate network of blood-red lines, so fine that they

had been invisible even from a few short feet away, had partitioned his face into dozens of irregular sections, as

intersecting thoroughfares divide up a road-map. My eyes travelled slowly down his body and I saw that the whole of

Kelt, including the suit he was wearing, was crisscrossed from head to foot by a tracery of exquisitely fine cuts like the

incisions of a scalpel.

I held my breath and reached out to touch his face. My index finger seemed to take an age to clear the last few inches

that separated us; finally my fingertip prodded his left cheek. I felt something shifting unnaturally beneath the slight

pressure, then watched as Kelt's head tumbled apart into a cascade of pieces that spilled and bounced over his

shoulders. Destabilised by this momentum from above, his whole body came apart and collapsed into a heap of organic

rubble at my feet.

I looked down at the grotesque pile of pieces. From a fragment of Kelt's head, one green eye glared up at me, cold

and sightless. 'Don't call me stupid,' I told it.

`Has it all gone?' the Doctor breathed, and I knew he was referring to my aggression: present and future.

`Yes,' I said. 'It's all gone.'

The Doctor's fingers closed gently around my wrist, and he turned me away from the sight of Kelt's remains. He

looked into my eyes without reproach.

`Then it's over,' he said. 'But I need you to consider the illnesses Kelt described. He knew he could threaten you with

them, because he knew you would have read about them, would understand how terrible they are.'

`Yes,' I said.

Ànd he knew that you'd know there are no real cures, only chemical suppressants,' said the Doctor.

'Schizophrenia. Bulimia. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. The finest minds on Earth have been searching for cures

for over a hundred years, but they still haven't found them. It's not the clinicians' fault. They've done all they can, but

the truth is that they've just not been clever enough. *No one* has been. If you take my meaning.'

Ànd you trust me to do the right thing, do you, Doctor?'

The Doctor smiled. 'Oh, yes,' he said. 'I trust you.'

Ì've got a challenge for you, too,' I said. Ìf I don't forget that you saved me, will you make sure that you don't forget it

either?'

Ì'll try, Imogen,' the Doctor replied. 'I will indeed.'

`Thank you, Doctor,' I said.

Our parting handshake was a curious experience. It seemed to me that the Doctor was in need of the contact, and for a

moment he appeared reluctant to let go. Perhaps I should not have been surprised: meeting someone capable of

understanding his mind must have been an uncommon experience for him, although I say so myself.

As the TARDIS departed she appeared to be blushing; that was my pink wallpaper, showing through. When the

sound of the dematerialisation had finally faded into silence, I sat down and wrote today's diary entry.

In a few moments I shall lie down on my bed. I shall close my eyes, concentrate, and release a flood of melatonin

from the pineal gland at the base of my brain. And, all being well, I should sleep for the first time in three weeks.

Thursday a6 April

My name is Imogen & I'm r6 & I like choclate. I have a pig & he's called Snowball cos of a book I read. I've made a new

freind, he's a doctor. He likes cricket & tea & travelling & I hope I meet him again but I'm not shore if I will. He travels

in a big blue box that can go anywhere & the Doctor knows everything or at least makes good guesses if he doesn't.

He's my freind and —

Oh, this is silly. I can't recapture the girl I was a month ago, and I don't suppose I even particularly want to. I just find

it ironic that the only way I've been able to appreciate the value of naiveté is by losing mine. But you can never return to

the way you used to be; all you can do is try to enjoy the person you're becoming. This is something I've learned.

After last night I am reacquainted with the pleasures of sleep, and I may make sleeping a weekly treat from now on,

although strictly speaking I don't need it. When I woke up I logged on straight away, and wiped all the files pertaining to

this project. As far as I'm aware, no record now remains of the technical details of the procedures used to expand my

mind. The military won't get their infallible field marshal now, at least not by the Imogen route. Ha!

It took quite a while to find my way out of the Institute, but I was greatly helped by my ability to seal off my image from

those around me. I just strolled through the crowds of white-coated researchers and technicians, for all practical

purposes invisible, while they went unsuspecting about their work. In the end I emerged into the light.

It's time to begin my own research programme now. I look forward to assembling my team, so that we can begin to

confront all those vile mental diseases that humanity has been obliged to tolerate for so long. Soon we will smile as we

watch them tumbling like ninepins before the weight of my

intellect and my team's dedication. So, 'Project Golden Girl' will after all yield some genuinely beneficial results,

something I'm sure the Doctor would appreciate. It's funny the way things turn out.

And all the time my mental development is a runaway process, propelled by its own irresistible momentum. I wonder

whether it will lead to omniscience — with regard to this planet's knowledge, at least — and, if it does, whether I will be

aware of the moment when it happens. Will there be an internal rush of feeling, a sort of orgasm, or will external reality

salute my transition to deity with some kind of cosmic firework display? Will people guess by looking at me that there

are no more books for me to read, no more philosophies to grasp, no more languages to master, no more facts to learn

about anything or anyone? Or is the notion of omniscience absurd in a world that moves faster than any one person

can, perpetually generating *new* information more quickly than the finite mind can hope to absorb it? The greatest

irony is that while the enhancement procedure has enabled me to remember absolutely everything, it still hasn't taught

me the trick of how to forget. Banishing the memory of my aunt, for example, is something I will just have to achieve for

myself. But I can make the choice to do it.

The Doctor, on the other hand, I choose not to forget. I don't know where he is now, or where he was, or where he

will be; I don't know whether he has managed to forgive himself for his past oversights, for the people he couldn't save,

for the monsters that were too ferocious to stop. But I know that whatever changes may happen in my own mind,

there will remain a place near the centre of it where no bad thoughts are ever allowed to go, and that's for him.

Daisy Chain

Xanna Eve Chown

The day was warm and peaceful. A gentle breeze blew in a whisper across the hillside, barely lifting the top leaves of the

trees along its ridge. The slopes were dotted with flowers. Dandelions grew near patches of clover, purple nettles and

hundreds of white daisies, raising their heads to the sun.

Only the drone of a bee broke the stillness, until a young couple appeared at the top of the hill and started making their

way down. The girl paused, falling behind her companion. She put her basket down on the ground and stooped to pick a

daisy. Smiling to herself, she started pulling off the tiny petals, glancing shyly at the dark-haired man in front of her

and murmuring in a sing-song voice. 'He loves me. He loves me not. He loves me...'

The man heard her and turned to watch. He frowned as he listened to the rhyme, then snapped, 'Testing a hypothesis,

Bella? I think it's already been proven.'

`Saul?' asked Bella, startled from her reverie.

Her friend raised an eyebrow. 'In case you'd forgotten,' he said, 'almost all daisies have thirty-four, fifty-five or

eighty-nine petals, in line with the established Fibonnaci sequence. The probability of that rhyme proving that anyone

loves you is two to one for, and therefore completely meaningless.'

Tears pricked at the back of Bella's eyes. She couldn't think ofan answer. Saul made a face and pulled the daisy from

Bella's hand, dropping it on the grass.

`You can be sure I'll bring this up at the next meeting,' he said grimly, striding away down the hill. At the bottom of

the slope, where the ground started to level off, a small circle of people were bunched together, planting seeds. The dark

fabric of their clothes rippled against the grass as they worked, bending and stretching in turn. Behind them, a

muddy stream ran towards some farm buildings, almost hidden by a copse of small trees.

Bella stayed where she was, staring at the daisy. At the back of her mind was a thought that didn't dare shape itself into

words. You *didn't even* ask me who the rhyme *was* about.

'Well, Mel, what do you think?' asked the Doctor, twirling round to face his companion. Mel looked up from her book.

'It's a hat stand,' she said.

'Yes, but do you think it looks good here?' asked the Doctor, stepping away from the corner. 'It's new. This room has

been lacking something for a while now. Don't you think it adds a little... you know?'

`Come on, Doctor,' sighed Mel. 'What's really the matter?'

Ì'm taking a break,' he replied. 'I've been trying to remember how to access the codes for the Vetlox scanner all day. I

thought if I had a bit of a clean-up it would help me concentrate. Tidy TARDIS, tidy mind,' he added, with a grin.

`Can I help?' asked Mel brightly, putting down her book. 'I'm quite good at finding my way around computer

systems.'

`Sorry, Mel, but I think this is a bit beyond you,' the Doctor replied. 'It's not your fault!' he added quickly, seeing the hurt

expression on her face. 'Even the rudimentary building blocks of this program don't exist on your planet until sixty years

or so after you left. If you had done your computer training then, you might be able to help, but... no...' He trailed off,

turning to glare at the computer on the console.

`That's hardly fair,' said Mel indignantly, standing up and putting her hands on her hips. 'I was probably the best

computer programmer in my year at college... and it wasn't exactly an easy course! I can't imagine your codes are that

tricky. What happens to computers in sixty years that's so great anyway?'

`Development of computer technology on Earth isn't a gradual

process,' said the Doctor. He placed one finger on his

lips thoughtfully. 'You left Earth just before things really start taking off in the computer world. By the third millennium,

new technology is being assimilated at an amazing rate. As the demand for more complex programs and applications

increases, so the industry speeds up its production — and its ideas.' He paused. 'I know you've seen a lot recently,' he

continued, in a more pacifying tone. 'You've grown accustomed to highly advanced technology. But it's all been from

alien cultures. It's just — different — when the technology belongs to your home planet. I think you would be amazed at

the changes that take place on Earth in just a few decades.'

`Prove it then!' said Mel, defiantly. 'Let's go and see, shall we?'

`Well...' said the Doctor.

`Go on, Doctor,' she pleaded, then grinned. 'You never know, we might find something that'll help with your codes.'

Àll right,' he said, spinning round to face the console. He pressed a few buttons. 'Let's see. Where will we go?'

`Not Pease Pottage,' said Mel, firmly. 'I don't want to bump into anyone I know walking around with a Zimmer

frame.'

`Close by, though?' replied the Doctor, smiling winningly as he set the coordinates. 'I always find the Sussex Downs a

tonic.'

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The doors swung open. The Doctor plucked his umbrella from the hat stand, set his hat at a jaunty angle, and stepped

out of the TARDIS. Shutting his eyes, he took a deep breath of

country air. He breathed out again with a satisfied sigh,

opened his eyes, looked down, raised his eyebrows — and stepped quickly back inside. 'Er... Mel?' he said. 'I think

someone's been expecting us.'

`What?' asked Mel, putting on her jacket and pulling her hair up over the collar. 'Where have we landed this time?'

'Unlikely as it seems,' muttered the Doctor over his shoulder, 'slap bang in the middle of a target.'

'A target?' asked Mel, peeking over his shoulder.

'A target,' agreed the Doctor, 'made of concentric rings... of hundreds of red and white daisies.'

The Doctor stepped smartly outside again. Mel followed, pulling the door shut behind her. She gasped, staring first at

the clusters of daisies at her feet, Alien outwards across the circles of flowers that spread away from her; red, white and

red again, forming a carpet several metres wide. She looked up. There were about thirty people standing at the edge of the

outer circle. They 'deemed busy, but subdued. No one seemed to notice her or acknowledged the Doctor's cheery wave. They

were too busy talking quietly and earnestly, tapping into hand-held computers and holding up gadgets that Mel could

only guess were cameras. One man stepped forward, grasping a small black box with a flashing red light. He shook it from

side to side until the light became a constant beam, then directed it straight at the Doctor's head.

'Doctor! Look out!' squeaked Mel in alarm.

'Nothing to worry about, Mel,' said the Doctor. 'That's a high-frequency electronic tape measure. He's gauging the

outer dimensions of the TARDIS. 'You see,' he added kindly, 'I told you your race made amazing technological leaps in

just a few decades.'

Mel opened and shut her mouth furiously. `Doctor. .' But he was already Striding purposefully through the red and white

daisies towards the group. 'I suppose we should find out who they are?' she suggested, doubtfully, trying sot to step on too

many flowers as she followed him.

'More to the point,' called back the Doctor, 'I think we need to find out who Ale are to receive such special treatment.'

He stopped at the edge of the outer circle.

'You don't know who you are?' asked a young man, making a note on his *computer screen. 'How very interesting.' He

looked up at them both, then speaking very slowly he said, 'You are part of the Final Proof.'

'We can understand English,' said Mel crossly, then turned to the Doctor. 'What is he talking about?'

Ì don't know, Mel,' replied the Doctor. 'Maybe someone else can help. Ahem.' He addressed the people, who had

moved closer to the TARDIS and were surrounding it, measuring and sketching. A girl in a dark red blouse was nuking a

rubbing of one of the side panels. 'Ahem!' he said again, in a slightly louder voice. 'Take me to your leader!'

One of the women stopped what she was doing and frowned. 'We have no 'leader,' she said. 'Our whole group is here to

check the Final Proof. Bella will

take you to the farmhouse for a drink, if you wish. We will come to you later, but first we have work to do.' She beckoned

to a girl who was standing on the edges of the group, fiddling with the end of one of her rust-coloured plaits. She still

had the gawkiness of a younger teenager although she must have been about eighteen. She stepped forward awkwardly,

throwing the Doctor a strange look. He returned the stare, levelly.

`Come on, Mel,' he said, 'let's go and get a cup of tea.'

The farmhouse was a short walk from the daisy circles, through a small wood overrun with rabbits. It was a beautiful day,

but Mel wasn't really in the mood to take in the countryside. She turned her attention to the farmhouse, scanning

ahead suspiciously to see if there was a trap waiting for them, but there was no sign of life. Maybe the woman had been

telling the truth, and the farm's inhabitants were all out inspecting the TARDIS. It wasn't a particularly comforting thought.

The building itself was old and run down. Parts of it were held up by wooden struts that in turn looked as if they

needed support. There was something uncomfortable about the place, Mel thought. It didn't have the worn cosiness

of an old barn or cottage that was settling comfortably into old age. Instead it looked as if it had been wounded and

patched up with stitches that were showing and starting to rot.

Outside in the yard, several pieces of machinery were scattered around in varying states of disrepair. It seemed like

someone had been tr o8

ying to take them apart and put them back together using only half the pieces. Nearby, a straggling

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line of chickens pecked around in the dirt, each one wearing an incongruous shiny blue collar with a number on the side

next to a silver chip. It made them look like electronically tagged prisoners on a chain gang.

Mel decided to wait until they were inside the farmhouse before she started asking Bella the thousand questions that

were crowding her mind. But once she was sitting at the large wooden kitchen table, watching the girl fill a kettle with

water from a tap and plug it into a wall socket, Mel found that her first question was for the Doctor.

`That's an electric kettle, Doctor,' she said, accusingly. 'My mum used to have one just like that. Where's all this scary

new technology you promised me?'

Bella gasped, and turned to them, wide-eyed. 'You know the fear of technology, too?' she asked.

Mel looked at her in surprise. 'Too?' she ventured.

`This community believes that humanity has lost control of the world... and that humanity should have control,' said

Bella.

Òh,' said Mel, sympathetically, shooting a look at the Doctor. 'But what's to blame for this loss?'

`Mathematics,' replied Bella, shrugging. 'Its principles shape our world-view. Everyone knows that.'

`They do?' asked Mel.

Òf course. True mathematics is at the very heart of our community's work.' Her emphasis on the word `true' had a

note of religious zeal. `We believe that maths should be the study of ideal patterns and forms, a tool scientists use to

explain the world around them. Yet mathematics no longer has this function. The world moves towards chaos. It admires it,

studies it— it creates it! Modern mathematics underpins and invents a world that no one can see.'

`When did this start?' asked the Doctor, giving the girl his full attention.

'A long time ago, but not too long to be corrected,' said Bella, as if reciting from memory. `The time of Newton was the

beginning of the end, although no one understood it then. But as the years progressed and technology grew, people

handed over control of their lives to other people and their inventions. The gap between what people could do and how

much they understood about bow they were doing it widened. A child could enjoy watching a digital image On a screen,

but have no desire to understand the coding methods used to transmit the signals. Let alone the mathematics used to

solve the equations of the orbital motion of the satellite that was bouncing the signal down to the set.'

`Fascinating,' murmured the Doctor. Bella stopped talking as the whistle of the boiling kettle filled the room. She

opened a cupboard, brought out a box Of small unpleasant looking rock cakes and proudly shook them out onto a plate.

`Saul says these are highly nutritious,' she said. There was something about the way she had said the name that

sounded like she'd eaten a bucket of sugar.

`Thank you,' said the Doctor, taking one of the tiny cakes. His hand hovered close to his mouth as he seemed to decide on

whether or not to take a bite. Seeing Bella was lost in her own thoughts, he dropped the cake into his pocket instead.

Mel guiltily followed his example as he attempted to steer Bella back to her previous topic.

`So how does your community fit into the scheme of things?' he prompted.

`Here we only use technology that we completely understand,' said Bella. Mel glanced around the kitchen. There were

gadgets that looked impossibly complex sitting next to others she remembered from her childhood. Some things looked

antiquated even by her standards. It would be a hard to date the room, she thought, if you only had its contents to go by.

Bella poured water from the kettle into the top of a glass pyramid. As the water level rose, it lifted up several glass

beads from the bottom. The beads were different sizes, filled with brown leaves and Mel watched as some of them

floated to the top of pyramid while others dropped back down to the bottom, each one spinning madly as the water

turned tea-coloured.

`Nothing like a good old-fashioned cuppa,' said the Doctor, smiling at Mel's face as Bella poured the liquid out into

three tall glasses. `Now, where Were we?'

Òur community lives apart from the rest of society,' continued Bella. `Science is not our master — we are in control

of it. Our aim is to return mathematical proofs and principles to their rightful place: as tools that humanity can use

to understand the world.'

`God is a mathematician,' muttered the Doctor under his breath:

The outside door opened, and one of the women who had been measuring the TARDIS hurried in. Her long green skirt

quivered around her a 110

nkles as she came to a halt on the uneven tiles. 'Bella!' she said sharply. 'You are relieved from your

duties at once. Go to your room and do not leave until I call you.'

Bella turned to face the older woman, pulling at one of her plaits in alarm. `But, Thea...'

Ì have just had a report about your behaviour that will force us to make you the subject of a council enquiry. May I

remind you that you have already had two warnings? If your beliefs are found to be unfit, your expulsion from the

community is imminent.' Bella didn't move. 'Now, girl! Don't just stand there.'

`Yes, Thea,' said the girl. She threw a terrified look at the Doctor and ran out of the kitchen.

`Well,' continued Thea, moving to a chair and sitting down. 'I hope she hasn't been filling your head with nonsense.'

She picked up Bella's still warm glass of tea and peered at the contents as if looking for an answer.

Òn the contrary,' replied the Doctor. 'We were having a very illuminating conversation.'

`What's she done wrong?' Mel interjected. 'Why are you treating her like that?'

`She claims to be in love,' answered Thea, unable to keep the sneer from her voice. 'That in itself is inadvisable, but she

has admitted to being confused about the emotion. Such an admission of weakness will not be tolerated. Here, we

give our lives to the study of clarity and precision, and the nobler aspects of the human soul.'

`But that's ridiculous,' said Mel angrily. 'Surely you can't punish someone for being confused...'

`This community is founded on certain principles,' said Thea. •

`Well, yes; we heard,' said Mel. 'Distrusting technology is one thing, but...'

`Logical principles,' continued Thea, smoothly. 'I can see Bella did not explain properly. We do not engage with anything that

we cannot fully understand and control — technological, biological... or emotional. By only interacting with that which we

understand, we grow stronger and become whole.'

`Whole?' snapped the Doctor. 'You refuse to allow a member of your community to fall in love, and you think you're

whole? I suppose you reproduce mathematically as well!'

`This conversation is not important,' Thea stated calmly. 'But I do have something to ask you, and I'd like to get to

work. The Question has been

prepared for some time. To make it easier I will only require you to answer yes or no.' She turned to the screen set in the wall

behind her and pointed a pen at it. A list of questions clicked into view and started scrolling quickly down, so fast that it was

impossible to make out any of the words. Two small tick boxes stayed static in the bottom corner of the screen, neatly labelled

'yes' and 'no'.

'Question, singular?' asked the Doctor, surprised.

'There were many,' said Thea. 'But over the years we compressed the data down until we were completely satisfied that this

was the only one required.' She glanced up, trying to read the expression on the Doctor's face and failing. 'Don't worry,' she said.

'I'm not going to actually ask you the One Question. We have made this as simple as possible for you. All I need is your

answer.'

'One Question, Final Proof. . Don't you get tired of talking in capitals all the dme?' snorted the Doctor, but Mel interrupted.

'Who's to say we're going to answer it at all?' she asked, folding her arms defiantly. The Doctor suppressed a grin.

'You may choose to say nothing,' replied the lady. 'The third alternative is acceptable.' She tapped her finger on the side of her

pen and a third tick box with a question mark over the top appeared next to the other two.

'Now hang on a minute,' said Mel. She was beginning to feel like a rat in a laboratory. 'You haven't even bothered to say why

you're so interested in us.'

Thea laughed. 'It's not you we're interested in,' she said. 'The Question refers to Pattern 863v.' Mel gave her a puzzled

frown. 'The blue box,' Thea added, in the condescending tone the young man had used earlier outside the TARDIS. She sighed.

'Just as the waves themselves are unaware of the patterns they make in the ocean, you too know nothing of the greater picture you

are a part of. It is likely that you are a manifestation of natural forces greater than yourself. Shall I explain?'

'I'm all ears,' retorted Mel.

Thea stared at her head. 'No, I don't think so,' she said, 'although there

uld be some more hiding beneath all that hair. You are confused,' she added as though talking to a small child. 'I will make

things clearer. Pattern 863v —the blue box — is a central part of our community's research. We have been tracking its

appearances throughout Earth's history, and have re-constructed the complex mathematical pattern that logically relates the

times and places *bf* each appearance. We know its whole history.'

'The Doctor's a pretty major part of the TARDIS's history,' said Mel, hotly, 'and he set the co-ordinates to come here. It wasn't

planned, exactly, but it was *his* choice!'

'Nonsense,' said Thea. 'This chain of events started a long time ago. Did you know that this box was here during the Stone

Age? I can't imagine either ofyou were around then. Where the two of you come from is part ofa different enquiry altogether.

Maybe one day a study of persons within the box will be started, but for now any questions about who or what you are would

detract

from the purity of the data-gathering on Pattern 863v. The only

information I want from you concerns the box alone.

And even that may not be admissible as credible evidence,' she added.

`This is preposterous,' exploded the Doctor. He had been listening intently. `You've collected random accounts of time

and place, and plotted theni as part of a mathematical sequence?'

Thea permitted herself a smile. 'By projecting the sequence forward, the community knew exactly where and when the

box would next appear. We moved into this farmhouse. We double-checked our figures, prepared the exact spot,

planted the daises, and waited.'

`Pure chance!' roared the Doctor. 'As a mathematician, surely you must be able to distinguish between significant

patterns and accidental ones?'

`There is no flaw in our pattern,' she answered, undisturbed. 'The box landed in the centre of the ring. It is the

Final Proof.' She flicked her pen across the screen, bringing up a set of graphs, tables and co-ordinates. 'By picking out

the key localities and dates, we can link the appearances with a greater stress on the T-step index.' She pointed her pen

to highlight part of the screen. 'Then we work out the intermediate flux. For example, England, 1867. 51° 32' North, 0.

5' West...'

`Daleks...' muttered the Doctor.

`...corresponds to France 1572.48° 48' North, 2° 20' East...'

'Ali, the Abbot,' winced the Doctor.

`...putting an emphasis on United States 1999, 37'47' North, 122. 26' West.'

`Hmm? Not sure that's happened yet,' said the Doctor, leaning

forward to peer closer at the screen.

`That's because it's not true!' said Mel, exasperated.

With an effort the Doctor pulled his eyes away from the screen. 'Of course it's not,' he said, then turned to Thea.

'Surely you know that even extensive numerical evidence can throw up phantom mathematical models! Numbers can

fall into patterns that repeat in an orderly fashion up until a trillion before one number doesn't fit. But that one still

makes a mockery of the whole sequence. No amount of experimental evidence can account for the possibility of

exceptions so rare you need numbers in the trillions to locate them. What we have stumbled into here — quite by chance —

is a fantastical coincidence. The universe having a joke at our expense.' The corners of Thea's lips twitched in

irritation. 'But even if it was all true, what's the point?' the Doctor continued, more quietly. 'You prove a pattern exists,

then what?'

`Prediction is another function of mathematics,' she answered, tersely. 'As soon as you have understood a pattern

you can predict it. And once you understand how a system works, you don't have to remain a passive observer. You can

attempt to control it.'

`Yes, it always comes down to control, doesn't it?' said the Doctor standing

up. Ì suppose that's logical for a human, but what about doubt, confusion... what about love?' He pointed with his

umbrella to the doorway Bella had run through. 'You're suppressing the full mix of human emotion — desire, hopes,

uncertainty — in favour of logic. Not only that, but the logic is flawed!' He spun on his heel and marched towards the door.

'When the TARDIS arrived, when b you thought you had been proven right, when all your years of speculation had paid off. . Were

any of you excited? Were you even pleased?' Holding the door open for *Mel,* he tried a different tack. 'I ask you,' he said to

Thea, who was using her pen to make notes on his speech. 'If it were possible to predict all things, would it be worth getting

up in the morning?'

We can't just leave,' said Mel, as they pushed past people still standing in the daisy rings, and shut the TARDIS door firmly

behind them. `We've proved them right! It makes me feel sick... we're trapped. Whatever we do from now on, wherever we go

in the TARDIS, whatever choices *we* make — it's all out of our control — it's just a part of their pattern.'

`Not a chance,' said the Doctor, tapping at the controls. 'And we're not just leaving. "One Question", indeed. And not even

bothering to tell me what it was? I'll give them more than one question to think about,' he added darkly. l 'But they are

wrong, aren't they, Doctor?'

Ànything in the universe can be explained and predicted, Mel — as long as you have one hundred per cent input_ But it's a

rare thing.' The Doctor shook his head. 'The poor fools out there don't have it, of course, even if they think they do. Thea and

her community are missing a vital piece of information, a piece of proof.'

`Which is?' asked Mel.

`That the TARDIS can travel through time,' replied the Doctor. 'Just because history is linear, the visits of the TARDIS to Earth

weren't and aren't.'

Mel grinned at him.

`Now could you just hold this lever?' the Doctor asked. 'And pull it exactly when I say so. This is a delicate operation, Mel. Let

me think. It takes a daisy about thirty-five days to grow from seed. So we need to travel back five weeks and land just. . about.. '

With a groan the TARDIS rematerialised.

`. .here!'

The Doctor switched on the scanner. They had landed to the left and further back from where they had just been. Outside, a

short way off, the community members were busy planting seeds. They didn't notice Pattern 863v appearing In the trees behind

them.

`Perfect landing,' said the Doctor, smugly, turning back to the console. Àren't you going to go out?' asked Mel.

`No need,' said the Doctor. 'It's the TARDIS that's important, not me — and here it is. We just wait for them to spot us, and

the pattern is broken.'

`This must be the first time you've landed anywhere and not wanted to set foot outside.'

Ànother pattern that doesn't exist,' he muttered testily, looking out at the group. Further up the hillside he caught

sight of Bella, staring forlornly at the back of a dark-haired man, who was walking purposefully away from her towards

the group.

`Poor Bella,' sighed Mel.

`Hold on,' said the Doctor, 'you stay here.'

He opened the door and stepped outside. Not stopping,' he boomed, causing everyone to turn and stare. For people

that didn't believe in excess feeling, the Doctor noted tartly, the emotional range they were displaying was quite extreme.

Shock, disappointment, disbelief .. One man took a couple of steps forward, then tottered back, staring stupidly at the

seeds he was holding, then at the TARDIS, then back at the seeds.

The only person who hadn't noticed the landing was Bella. She was so wrapped up in her own thoughts she didn't

notice the Doctor's approach until he was beside her. She jumped as he tapped her on the shoulder, dropping the half-

plucked daisy she was holding.

`Try this one, it's got a lot more petals,' he said, producing a huge yellow flower. 'Guaranteed to give you the answer

you want every time!'

Bella looked away shyly, brushing tiny white petals from her lap.

Òf course,' he added, 'it's a silly rhyme, really, and it doesn't prove a thing. But it's good to dream, you know.' He

handed her the flower. 'You can tell the others I answered their Question if you like — make up any old answer you want.

But why not say you can only tell Saul — over dinner for two, eh?' He winked as Bella blushed, then slowly smiled.

The Doctor picked a daisy from the carpet of flowers by her feet, and threaded it through his buttonhole. Then he

turned and strolled back to the TARDIS, humming quietly under his breath.

Sustainable Energy

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Matthew Griffiths

Sunlight flickered up Guzman's arm. In the controlled darkness of the chamber, it almost felt too precise to be

natural light. He kept himself as still as possible for a moment, then slowly turned to look at the experiment.

Across the laboratory, behind a screen, beneath the skylight, Alberto was still there Guzman blinked, then checked

the readings on the console beside him. He shivered. It hadn't worked. Why?

'He—help me.'

Guzman jumped. The voice was Alberto's, and just Alberto's. Guzman took a step towards the screen.

`How does it feel?' he asked the technician.

'Help me,' Alberto repeated. There was effort in his voice as he struggled against the straps to express himself.

'What is it?'

'I —'

Guzman blinked again. Alberto seemed to shimmer against the slab, as though there were a heat haze behind the

screen.

'Alberto?'

'Guzman?' The reply came from somewhere else, from his link-up. `Ye—yes?'

'Are you busy?'

'I've just begun the first phase,' he hissed. 'Of course I'm busy.'

'Well,' said the voice. `Well, I'm very pleased you've got things going. But

there was no need to be so impatient. We're getting some new help. I'd like

you to come up and meet him.'

'Help me.'

'I can't leave — can't leave the experiment now.'

`There'll be plenty of time later. I'll see you in the main gallery in ten minutes.' The link was cut.

`Help me.'

'I — I'm needed elsewhere.' Guzman took a gulping breath. 'Don't worry. You'll have a constant supply of energy.'

He looked into the column of sunlight that fell onto Alberto. The man's face flickered again. For a second, it seemed to

blister with light. Then it resolved itself into a blank expression.

'You must help me,' Alberto croaked.

Guzman bit his knuckle. He flicked a switch, and the screen between them

went black. The room darkened. Stifling his tears, Guzman hurried from the laboratory.

Surrounded by a cloud of light from the window, the Doctor was just a silhouette opposite her. She blinked, but could

only make out the simplest details: the flicks of hair off the back of his neck, the square set of his face, the velvet shoulders

of his jacket. She turned to one side, keeping her eyes closed until the colours faded.

She heard the Doctor sigh. 'Professor Reid?' He leant over the desk and pressed a switch. The window behind

him eased itself into a dim transparency, the sun puncturing it like a white bullethole. She looked across at him.

He was much clearer now, and he seemed oddly out of place in front of the sharp lines of the window. The stocky

frame, the Oxford bags that didn't quite hide his paunch, the rumpled jacket in midnight blue. His sardonic smile

suggested he might know just how out of place he was. She tapped the device on her desk. 'Well, you certainly have a fine set

of credentials, here, Dr Smith. Mortarhouse Oxford, Edinburgh, Malebolgia State, Berkeley...' The Doctor was pacing in

the bay of the window. Now and again, the sun picked out wisps of red in his wavy brown hair.

Ì'm glad you think so.' He stopped, his feet settling heavily into the carpet, then tapped the window with his

knuckle. 'I happen to think that this technology represents some very impressive work as well.'

She waved her hand. 'Just a useful side effect. The chemical reacts in such a way as to form many reflective

configurations.'

The Doctor turned, and clasped his hands in front of him. After a moment, he said, 'Yes, it has a great deal of promise.

And I believe I could help Sunbelt realise a lot of that potential.'

`Yes, yes.' She fussed with the screen for a moment. Àh — but aboutyour last project.'

`Terminated.' The Doctor said quickly. 'Groundwork for exploiting an undersea energy source. It was being

supported by... by a research conglomerate. But the backers pulled out.'

Ì see. And you were all... made redundant?'

The Doctor laughed richly. 'It's not a pleasant experience, being fired.' He was immediately serious once again. 'I'm

afraid I can't say any more,' he remarked. His weatherbeaten face had a solemn expression.

Professor Reid nodded. 'Information is such a precious commodity. I understand.'

`Naturally.'

`Hmm.' She tapped a few more keys on the Doctor's device. 'I'll just update your PAN. This will give you the necessary

clearances, until we make some more permanent arrangements.' She stood and handed it back to him

`Thank you.'

`My pleasure.' She took his hand. 'Welcome on board! Let me give you the tour.' The Doctor nodded, crossing to the

door. Reid looked out at the blaze of sun. 'It's a beautiful night for it.'

As they stepped out onto the site, Reid's blonde hair shone, and her glasses darkened in the sunlight. The Doctor

pulled a panama hat from his pocket and fanned himself with it. Reid flapped her light lab coat to cool herself. 'It

takes a little while to get acclimatised,' she said.

The Doctor donned his hat. 'Oh, I adapt very quickly.'

`How long did you say you'd been over here?' she asked.

'I forget.' Then, more conversationally, 'Though it's been almost a year since...' She nodded, looking him up and

down, trying to be nonchalant about it. `Before you ask, yes, I do travel light,' he added.

Ì see.'

He walked around one of the array's supports, then looked up at the underside of the panels. The technology's

come a long way, hasn't it?' Just as he had suspected.

Ìt took the best part of a century to develop practical solar cells, after the photovoltaic effect was first discovered. But

given the tremendous need for energy, even with the new cells that Perseus has helped us to develop, we couldn't afford

to wait as long again to make the same amount of progress.'

The Doctor inched out beneath the sunlight, pulling the brim of his hat down. 'And no one expected developments

overnight.'

Reid smiled, and held her hand skywards. 'It's thanks to Perseus that we've been able to advance the chemical and

radio technology needed to make those reflectors.'

The Doctor beamed. In that case, he'd very soon be making advances of his own. Almost as an afterthought, he said,

'Very apt.'

Ìt allows for round-the-clock solar electric generation.'

'No one wants the lights to go out.'

Ànd that's precisely why we need scientists of your calibre here, Doctor. The sensitivities of those mirrors need to

be incredibly finely tuned.'

The Doctor stroked his chin. 'I'm sure my insights will facilitate the process enormously.' His lips twitched. 'Some light-

speed advances, you might say.'

They stopped at a door set into a low hillside in the desert. Reid activated this with a wave of her hand, and it opened

with an electronic click. She ushered him inside. The Doctor removed his hat, taking a deep breath of cool air as he

looked around. 'How do the flora and fauna cope with the perpetual sunlight?'

`Perseus financed a number of reserves and gardens,' Reid explained, leading him onto a metal gallery, circling

the base of an elaborate skylight.

Ànd we've researchers dedicated to investigating the possible agricultural benefits.'

Ìmpressive,' the Doctor murmured. He peered into the levels below the gallery, each illuminated by reflected or

refracted sunlight. Figures in white lab coats moved brightly from one desk to another, taking readings and making

calculations.

`You don't take on a place like this and start letting energy go to waste,' beamed Reid. The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

Reid blushed. 'When I warm to my theme, I'm — well, between you and me, some of the staff do call me "Infra Reid".'

Òh, aye?' chuckled the Doctor.

Rh.' Reid caught sight of a tall, dark-haired man across the gallery. 'Dr Guzman!' she called. The man looked around,

then scurried across to them. He hunched a little towards Reid and the Doctor.

Reid grinned. 'Dr Guzman, this is Dr John Smith. Dr Smith, this is Miguel Guzman, Dr Miguel Guzman.

Electrochemical specialist.'

Over Guzman's shoulder, the Doctor could see a display cycling

through the spectra. He strode past the other man

and leant over the screen. 'How fascinating.'

`Guzman is perfecting the algorithms for adjusting the composition of the reflector array...'

Às I can see.'

`...And Professor Reid is using these to maximise the reflection of sunlight onto Sunbelt,' Guzman completed. He

stepped up beside the Doctor, as though waiting to be acknowledged.

The Doctor flicked a couple of switches, then raised a knuckle to his lower lip. He looked at the new readings.

`This displays the signature of the sunlight you're receiving here?' he snorted. 'There seems to be a great deal of

interference.' He tapped the keyboard. 'A lot of unnecessary extra signals.' He looked at Guzman pointedly.

Though if the reflectors could carry signals like this, thought the Doctor, then he stood an even better chance of

summoning some help.

Reid moved between them. 'As I said, Dr Guzman is still perfecting the algorithms, and that, Dr Smith, is why you are

here.'

The Doctor glanced at her. 'My apologies, Dr Guzman,' he said at length. `Like Professor Reid, my enthusiasm for the

science sometimes gets the better of me.' He reset the console. 'I look forward to working with you. After all, this system

has the potential to benefit all of us.'

As the sun rose, the reflector was briefly a small black speck in the sky. Like a blind spot, the Doctor thought. Reid

instructed a technician to show him to his quarters early in the morning, so he could get settled in.

As soon as the door was shut, the Doctor seized a chair and sat down at the

spacious table. He pulled a jotter from his pocket, and began transcribing the readings he had memorised. He totted these up with

swift strokes of his pen, then turned the pages and started scribbling diagrams furiously. There had definitely been a pattern in

them. Guzman and Reid couldn't fail to be aware of that. But did they know he had spotted it too? He paused for a moment and

raised his hand to his lips. He could hear the pleasant hum of the chiller, easing cool air into the room.

If only he'd had the TARDIS with him, he wouldn't have needed the Sunbelt's facilities. But it was precisely because he'd

had to abandon the TARDIS that he needed the equipment here. This level of technology was leaps and bounds ahead of

what should be available on Earth in 2040, and if he could use it to contact the people — if they *were* people — who had

manufactured it, they might be able to help him find a way to get back to the TARDIS. And then he could begin to think about

making good on his promise to Vollmer...

The Sunbelt could *give* him what he wanted, though he'd already wasted enough time getting this far. The Doctor gazed out

of the window. He needed to get back to Guzman's station and corroborate his suspicions. And what did Sunbelt want from him

in return, he wondered?

Reid watched Guzman pacing up and down in front of her, flitting in and out of the sunlight. She sighed.

'Perseus was assured you were the authority in this field.'

'I — I am operating at the limits of my knowledge. Even with what I have learnt from you,' he snapped. 'You have the

information, why do you not use It?'

'Perseus has certain kinds of information, Dr Guzman. But it relies on the cooperation of local experts to implement its

projects thoroughly.' She smiled. 'We can't be expected to throw information at a problem and hope to solve it. That's hardly a

sustainable way of doing things!'

Guzman turned and glared at her. 'And what of Dr Smith? Is he one of your local experts?'

'Ah. Oh, er, Dr Smith. Well, of course —'

'Of course what? Do you think he's likely to help us?' Guzman scratched his forearm.

'I suggest you return to your work and not worry about Dr Smith,' Reid huffed. 'We have information about him too, you

know.'

The Doctor strode across the desert towards the main facility. The air was still, and he could hear the chirruping of crickets in

the near distance. A lizard scuttled across the track in front of him. He paused when he reached the facility door, and gazed

upwards. Behind the sky, the stars would be plodding their inexorable way through space, and somewhere else, the moon

was

waxing, begin to count off another month. The Doctor sniffed, and turned his attention back to the door.

Though it had opened automatically for Reid earlier, it did not respond to him. He found a panel to one side and waved

his hand in front of it. Still, no response. He examined the panel; apart from an amber LED that ticked on and off at the

top, there weren't any distinguishing features. He looked for a moment longer, and then made out a small shape,

embossed on the panel beneath the light — a stylised winged helmet symbol.

The Doctor produced his PAN and placed this against the reader. The door clicked open, and the Doctor raised an

eyebrow. 'A kind of key as well.' He went inside.

He let the door shut behind him as he made his way onto the top gallery. The sunlight filtering through from the

skylight felt comfortable, but the Doctor didn't let that distract him. He made his way around the upper gallery, ignoring

the technicians he passed. As he approached Guzman's station, he could see the man bustle across to him.

`Doctor Smith. You are rested?'

Ì'm a light sleeper. I — I'd like to familiarise myself with the procedures here.'

Guzman beckoned to one of the staff. 'Of course. I will have Technician Lopez assist you.'

The Doctor was already poring over the console. 'That won't be necessary. I work very well by myself '

`But I must insist.'

The Doctor looked at him. 'Doctor Guzman, I don't want you to waste the valuable time of your staff bringing me up

to speed.' He smiled. 'It will be much quicker this way, and once I'm ready, we'll be able to compare notes.' Guzman

stood there, his right forearm grasped in his left hand.

Ì understand, Dr Smith. But I would be very grateful if you did not begin resetting the algorithms again. The procedure

is very complex, very delicate, and I'm carrying out some significant tests with it at the moment.'

Ì assure you, Dr Guzman, I do not intend to hinder this protect in the slightest. Quite the opposite. By working my

way through the system, I'm hoping to gain some insights of my own.'

Guzman snorted. 'Very well. I trust your insights will be of use to all of us. Now, if you will excuse me?' He nodded

stiffly and walked away.

The Doctor looked around the gallery. Guzman's temper seemed to have drawn some stares, but most of the staff

were proceeding with their work. Those that had been distracted avoided the Doctor's gaze. How efficient a setup was

this really, he wondered? Guzman's attitude seemed out of place; if the Doctor really hadn't been permitted to work

unattended, then Reid would have told him so. He rubbed his bottom lip. After a moment, he looked around once

more. He couldn't see any security cameras, monitoring devices.

Were they integrated within the equipment? The Doctor inspected the instrument bank in front of him; if it was as

delicate as Guzman said, then running security subroutines would reduce its efficiency. So, no one needed to know what he

was doing.

He nodded to himself, and then got to work.

Guzman looked through the screen at Alberto. He had checked the readings again, to ensure he had not made a mistake,

but they were as he feared. The signals required were too complicated for transmission.

`Help me.'

`You are beyond help.' Guzman sighed.

`Help me.'

`You are trapped between two states now. I cannot help you.'

`Help me.'

Why must Alberto torment him like this? Hadn't the man been willing to make the sacrifice? Hadn't Guzman done

all he could for him? Guzman slapped the screen with the flat of his hand. 'I cannot help you!' he said, sobbing.

`Help me.'

Guzman shuddered. He turned a switch and watched the glass partition cloud and blacken again. Still a man He had

so wanted to hear the spectrum of voices, dazzled by their colour. But Alberto could not reach them, not become a part

of what he ought to have been.

The Doctor cursed as the readings inched their way across the screen. If this was the most advanced technology this

time period had to offer, then the sooner he could recover the TARDIS, the better. But wasn't all this equipment supposed

to be beyond the state of the art?

The Doctor blinked. The ghost of an image flickered behind the main readings. Then there was another.

Interference? Reflections? Another. The Doctor looked round. No one had remarked on anything, but if the data were

correct then something very strange was going on at the extreme ends of the spectra of the sunlight reflecting onto the desert

outside. He cursed again. It was exactly the reading he was after; he just didn't have the equipment to analyse it. He moved to

the next monitoring station along. This would have to do.

He recalibrated the receptor, compressing the visible spectra into

the middle and magnifying the readings in the infrared

and ultraviolet. How on Barth could he be getting readings of this intensity? Photovoltaics relies almost entirely on visible

light, he reminded himself, but Sunbelt was now being bombarded with the invisible wavelengths. And there was a

pattern.

He made some rapid calculations in his head, and swiftly tapped some parameters into the workstation. A geometric model

of Sunbelt appeared, and

he pointed at the screen. If he was here, then the bombardment was concentrated on...

He slowly turned, until he was pointing in the direction Guzman had taken.

Reid listened to Guzman's garbled report, then thought to herself for a moment. 'Come to my office,' she instructed,

then cut the link. She clasped her hands in front of her and looked down at the desk.

It was fine. They were still at the experimental stage. The Ethereal had not expected them to achieve success overnight.

She breathed out It was fine.

She looked through the window. The sun blurred around its edges, bleeding into the tint of the glass. It warmed

her a little. Clearly, they were dealing with one of the most powerful forces known on this planet. In this system. There

was nothing to be gained in denying that — and everything from embracing it.

When the Doctor reached Guzman's laboratory, he looked around, but there was no one behind him. Whatever

Guzman was working on, it obviously warranted considerable secrecy. He found the door's activation panel, and

pressed his PAN against it There was no response. He looked at the screen on the device. Several areas were blocked off

in black. Interesting. He hadn't been given the full security clearance yet. Well, he didn't have time for this. He tore the

panel away from the wall. Sparks glittered through the sunlight from the transom. He snatched two wires, pressing

them together, and the door clicked open.

As he shut the door behind him, he realised how much darker it was inside. Energy conservation? It seemed unlikely that

would be the only reason. He crossed to the workstation that occupied the far wall. What seemed more probable was

that the work being done here was with the nature of sunlight itself, and it had to be kept isolated from all other outside

influences.

Which was all very well, the Doctor reflected, but where would the sunlight enter the room? He studied the

instruments.

This was it: he turned a switch that resembled the one in Reid's office. Nothing happened. The Doctor tapped the

panel in frustration. Reid had been so free with information about the rest of the project, so why had he been left in the

dark about this?

The Doctor stabbed a button at random, and an image formed on the wall to his right. It was the Earth, rotating in

space, with lights picked out around it. The Perseus reflectors, thought the Doctor. They were positioned above the

equator, and the regions that were lit up below were illuminated with perpetual sunlight. 'So that's her Sunbelt,' the

Doctor muttered. He looked back at the readings.

The equipment here was specifically calibrated to detect those

signals that he'd been trying to monitor from the main

workstation, he realised. This was

the state-of-the-art tec123

hnology he had been expecting. He cycled through the readings. It was ingenious — they were using

the reflectors to carry signals on waves in the invisible parts of the spectrum. But what sort of signals?

The Doctor looked through the readings once more and pondered. The data here were incredibly complex. Intricate

shadows in the sunlight. No wonder Guzman was so touchy about modifying the reflector algorithms: this

phenomenon was much more than a side effect. And that meant that whoever had constructed the technology was going

to be very useful to the Doctor.

He cocked his head for a moment. What was it all for? He scanned the panel once again. There was something he was

overlooking. He pulled the PAN from his pocket and ran it across the console. There was no response. He tapped its

keypad. The PAN could store and track data about him, so it might be able to process data retained within the

instruments here. If he could extract the most recent set of instructions, he could run them through again. He clasped

the PAN to the console once more, and it began to do its work.

There. It had found the most recent input. The Doctor flipped the PAN over, and fed the information back into the

machine. Just like copying a key; the PAN could now give him access. The wall to his right became cloudy,

translucent, then clear.

'He—help me.'

The Doctor glared at the figure — the image? — behind the screen. It was human, a man who flickered on and off like a

faulty monitor, his eyes two fine points of light.

'Help me,' he stammered, his body crackling with interference. 'What happened to you?' the Doctor asked.

'I they wanted me to be part of something —'

—

'Who?'

'Perseus.'

'Was it Guzman? Did Guzman do this to you?'

r 'The Ethereal.' The man flickered so brightly now that the Doctor was forced to squint.

'What is the Ethereal?'

'I am part — help me!' the man screamed.

The Doctor crossed the room, one hand shielding his eyes, and peered Trough the screen. The figure was standing

against an upright slab of black metal, and sunlight filtered into the room through tinted glass above his bead, like

the window in Reid's office. Surrounded by light were the shadows of the man's nervous system, and the Doctor could

just make out the net of synapses in the brain. The only truly tangible thing that remained, though, Seemed to be a dark,

dull bone in the wrist.

'What's that?' the Doctor growled.

The man strained to look down, then tore his head away. 'It's part of me,' hissed.

`Some kind of implant?' A thought struck the Doctor. 'Is that what they use to monitor you?' The man said nothing.

'And that signal they were trying to broadcast... it was you.' He turned and studied the readings again. 'There's far too

much information in the human body to be contained in this,' he muttered. 'Whoever planned this has made a

botched job.'

`Help me. I am Alberto —'

The Doctor returned to the control panel. Not any more, friend.' He tapped a sequence of keys. Alberto flickered, his

mouth ajar, then vanished. There was a clatter of metal, and the room was black.

Ànd where was the Doctor when the lights went out?'

`We will need the Doctor's help, then,' Reid told him.

`But this is my project,' Guzman protested.

`Worried you won't get your name in lights? Is that it?'

Ì am responsible for what has happened. I need to —'

`Take the Doctor into your confidence,' Reid said patiently.

`How?'

`Well, he's confided in us,' she replied. 'More than he knows.'

There was a moment of silence, then the door slid open. The Doctor stood there, scowling.

Ì think I must ha 124

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ve caught the sun,' he said, 'because my ears are burning.' `Please, Doctor. I don't think Guzman is

quite in the mood for jokes.'

`You call this joking?' Guzman spluttered. 'There is nothing funny. Alberto

has —'

`Ceased to exist,' the Doctor interrupted. He threw a scorched piece of metal onto Reid's desk. 'Unless you count

this.'

Reid sighed and looked at the implant. 'Well, that's a pity.' She looked at Guzman 'We were hoping Alberto himself

may have formed part of the Ethereal.' She prodded the charred component with a pen. Tut at least the data stored

in this will help us in making the process more user friendly.' The loss of Alberto was regrettable, but the information he

had left behind would be invaluable.

`Who are these "users"?' snapped the Doctor. He pointed at the implant. Ànd is that all people are to them? A set of

numbers to crunch?'

Reid blushed. 'Every individual is important to the Ethereal. It's every employee's choice whether he or she wants to

become part of our network or not.' She sighed. 'I was rather hoping you might choose to join us as well, Doctor. Once

I'd explained what we were working on here.'

Guzman was staring at the component on Reid's desk. 'I never chose that,' he said. 'I believed that the work we did

here was for the benefit of everyone.' His look shot between Reid and the Doctor. 'I made the same sacrifice, wanting

to be part of a greater community. A greater humanity,' he said, waving his arm.

'Everyone on Earth working towards a common goal. A global community. I beryone under the sun,' Reid smiled.

'Oh, very good,' muttered the Doctor. 'And how do you make everyone choose that common goal, hmm?'

'Perseus knows how to market itself,' Reid said. 'We're leading the field in many sectors. People appreciate that, find

employment with us a very 1 attractive proposition. We like to have the personal touch, which is why our employees are fitted

with one of these, rather than a PAN.'

'And you expected me to "choose" one of these as well?' The Doctor sneered. 'Is this what Perseus is really interested in?'

Reid shrugged. 'Our interests go much further than that, Doctor. We do have a chip in every PAN.'

'I trust they won't boil over.'

Reid gazed at him levelly. 'A range of interests that includes even yourself, Doc tor. '

'Yes, she knows all about you,' spat Guzman

The Doctor frowned. 'What do you mean?'

Reid scratched her head. 'We know why you came here. What you want.' She paused. 'And we know about the DEEP.'

'Then why haven't you stopped me?'

'Why should we? You've just the kind of experience we need here, to integrate humanity and the Ethereal. You've got

the single-mindedness the '

Ethereal needs.' She stood up and strolled round to the other side of the desk, leaning against it and folding her arms. 'In turn,

we might be able to provide t you with a way to get off this planet. Perhaps even your own route.'

'He's one of you?' Guzman asked.

'No, I'm not,' the Doctor said. Hesitantly, he addressed Reid. 'You could * help me recover the TARDIS?'

'Is that what you call it?' Reid asked. 'Well, yes. Yes, we could. You'd have to kelp us first, of course.'

The Doctor tapped a forefinger against his chin. 'And if I refuse even then?' Reid waved a hand. 'We do have ways. But I'd

prefer not to go into those. A little vulgar, if you ask me.'

1 The Doctor considered. 'I can't say I'm not tempted. But you seem to know enough already.'

. Reid returned to her seat and toyed with her keypad. 'Well, that is a shame.' She pressed a switch, and the Doctor cried out,

clutching his side. 'A chip in every PAN, Doctor, and this one just caught fire.'

1 . 'What have you done to him?' Guzman cried.

'Data about. . about certain individuals is quite extensive,' Reid offered. She watched the Doctor writhe on the floor. 'In the

case of the Doctor, here, Perseus acquired some useful information about his physiology that has been stored on the Perseus

chip in his PAN.'

`So much for data 126

protection,' the Doctor spat.

`You should be taking it easy,' Reid insisted. Her attention returned to Guzman 'Information on certain physical

weak spots, actually, which it is then very easy to pinpoint with an energy discharge from the PAN itself. Here.' She

beckoned to Dr Guzman, and he moved hesitantly around the table towards her. 'Whenever the Doctor looks too at

ease, press this.' Guzman looked at her dumbfoundedly. 'I'd like to give him the chance to reconsider some of his

contract options, while I verify some of your results.' She took Alberto's implant from the table in front of her, and

walked from the room.

After a moment, she popped her head round the door again. Her glasses slid down her nose, and she pushed them

back up again with her forefinger. `Think of it as motivational

management, Doctor. Doctors.' Then she left.

The Doctor made a lunge for the desk, and Guzman's hand twitched over the

keys instinctively. The Doctor yelled in pain, a hand's distance from the desk.

Ìs that how you treated Alberto?' he gasped. 'A flick of the switch?'

Ì didn't mean to do it,' Guzman said.

The Doctor snorted. 'To him? Or me? Neither smacks of much scientific rigour.' He lay there, panting for a moment.

Guzman's hand hovered over the keypad again. Tor instance,' Dr Smith continued, 'do you have any idea how much

energy the PAN has been discharging?' Guzman shook his head. 'Look at you! A leading technical authority at the

world's biggest power station, and you can't even tell me how much is left in this battery!' The Doctor gave a raspy chuckle.

'There probably isn't enough in here to give me another jolt, you know.' Guzman's hand moved away from the panel.

The Doctor vaulted awkwardly over the desk, and swung his palm out to meet Guzman's forearm. The PAN made

contact with Guzman's implant, and he screamed in agony. He looked up at the Doctor through watery eyes.

Breathing heavily, the Doctor managed a smile. 'But there's just enough left for you.'

Reid strolled beneath the arrays, toying with her glasses. The tinting didn't seem to have activated. Perhaps there was

some interference.

It was a pity the Doctor had taken so badly to Perseus's project. She'd rather have eased him into it gradually, but the

man had insisted on having his own way. Partnering him with Dr Guzman hadn't been such a good idea, but she hadn't

foreseen that. And she was supposed to be an expert in the invisible spectrum.

Her glasses still weren't working, but she couldn't let herself be troubled by this when there were more important

problems. She narrowed her eyes, and stepping out from the shade of the arrays, she walked into the light.

Guzman had curled up behind Reid's desk, and was sobbing quietly. The

Doctor knelt above him, programming his PAN. 'These systems are remarkably resilient. I suppose that's

Perseus's expertise. Wherever it comes from.' He grabbed Guzman's arm and began to drag him into the bay of the

window. 'Time I brought you into the light.'

`What are you going to do?' Guzman whimpered.

Òh, it's a simple procedure,' the Doctor remarked, tapping a few more details into the PAN. 'Much as I did back in

your laboratory — taking a recent Input and then redirecting it as an output.'

Àren't you going to,' Guzman swallowed, 'help me?'

Ì don't think so. There's one way of making sure that the Sunbelt doesn't get any tighter. I'm going to cut the project's

knowledge off at its source.' He had returned behind the desk, and was programming Reid's window for a particular tint.

'That should be about right.'

`But I can help you to —'

Ì'm sorry. I don't have any time for this.' The Doctor crossed the room and pressed the PAN against Guzman's wrist.

Light spilled through the window onto Guzman's head and blazed through his mouth as he began to scream His

nervous system burned red, then black, and his whole body radiated light. Then it flickered and he disappeared, his Implant

dropping to the floor.

The Doctor blinked black dots from his eyes, knelt, and picked the device from the carpet. Then he turned and left the

room.

The Doctor pulled on his hat, shading his eyes as he strode across the desert walkways, nodding at the technicians he passed.

It was so easy for them to acknowledge him, knowing nothing of what he'd just done. And he'd rather keep it that way.

How much more obvious it would have been if they were all part of the Perseus network — Reid's Ethereal? From

beneath the brim of his hat, he looked at the other staff as they carried out their duties. How many of them had taken

Perseus's coin?

Elsewhere at this meridian, it would be getting on towards night, thought the Doctor. He looked up into the sky and saw

the dark curve of the reflector. An eye about to open on this world forever.

He made his way swiftly back to Guzman's laboratory, passing fewer and sewer people as he approached. No one had

repaired the door panel yet. Perhaps the staff rota was too efficient at keeping people on their allotted duties. But the door

was locked — there must have been an override on the other side that Reid had employed.

The Doctor tugged Guzman's implant from his pocket, and placed it flat against the panel. The door clicked open and he

slipped inside, shutting it softly behind him.

Professor Reid was standing at the control bank with her back to him. She was inspecting some of the readings.

'Guzman. Did the Doctor reconsider?' `Pm afraid I didn't, Professor.'

Reid turned. Àh. I'm sorry about that.' She fiddled with her glasses. 'And Guzman?'

`He fell asleep on a sunbeam,' the Doctor said darkly. He stood beside her. `Which reminds me. I'm not sure I ever got

up to speed on this facility.' He began to fiddle with the controls, and the hologram of the globe appeared again. Reid

folded her arms, and took a step back from the equipment. Thousands of points of light appeared around the Sunbelt.

Ì could call some of the security staff, you know,' she said.

`Why don't you?' The Doctor smiled. Now the hologram homed in on the Central American station on the Sunbelt,

and the Doctor tapped it with a finger. 'According to your system, it's only Guzman and —' He looked again. The

screen indicated that there was just one implant in the room. Just Guzman — the ghost in the machine. The Doctor

threw the implant to the floor and pointed at Reid. 'You're one of them! Part of this Ethereal.'

Òops.' Reid flushed. 'I suppose I am.'

Àll the data that this project gathers — and you're not anywhere in it.'

`No, not exactly,' said Reid. 'In order to work efficiently here, I've had to assume a human personality. Having a vast

resource of personnel — personal information... well, that can only help me.'

`That's very neat,' the Doctor scoffed. 'But not so efficient. Think of all of the compromises you've had to make,

Professor, all the drawbacks of being human.'

Reid smiled slightly.

Ànd if all you are is information,' the Doctor continued, 'then you're just so many numbers to crunch yourself. This

ends now.' He turned back to the console, placing his PAN flat against one of the panels. Reid seized his arm.

`We can still do this professionally, you know. Work it out as colleagues.'

The Doctor threw her off. 'I'm beginning to think I'm not such a team player.'

Reid's voice was shrill. Tut without our technology you'll be trapped on this planet.'

`Then I'll just have to be patient,' the Doctor growled. He flicked a couple of switches. It was using the information against

itself, locating the weak points, that was the key. As Reid had done with him, as he had done with Guzman. He could

hear Reid behind him, her breathing becoming shallower, gradually quieter and quieter.

The Doctor looked at the screen: the hologram disappeared into itself. One by one, the monitors went out. The room

was black.

`What have you done?' Reid whispered.

Ì've switched off the lights.'

`You operated all the systems from that station?'

I'That was your plan, 131

too. I just used a 1 29

different set of instructions.' The

Doctor felt the blistered PAN in his palm. He let it fall to the floor. 'A little something I learned from Guzman.'

Àll those people in the Sunbelt — they're — like Alberto?'

There was a pause. The silence seemed to ring. Then the Doctor

said, 'No. That's not really my style. I found the flaws

in the technology.' He savoured the stillness and the darkness. 'And burned it out. Permanently.'

`The Ethereal still exists, though,' she spluttered. 'Beyond the Earth.'

`Perhaps.' The Doctor breathed out, then continued. 'But this place is isolated from all outside influences. Guzman

was not completely without scientific rigour.'

Ì know,' said Reid blankly.

`So whether your Ethereal exists or not, you are no longer part of it, Professor Reid. Whereas I am quite self-

sufficient.' The Doctor put his hands I in his pockets. 'And as I now seem to have so much time on my hands, I'm going

to carry out a little experiment.' The Doctor paused. 'I'm going to see how long you can survive on your own.'

`Where — where does that leave you?' hissed Reid.

`Where I was when the lights went out,' the Doctor laughed. 'In the dark.'

Culture War

Kate Orman

Mathilde at the age of five, riding her tricycle into the farmhouse's sitting room. Her insulin pump is a great chunk of plastic

awkwardly strapped to her arm. She has drawn 'no smoking' signs on butcher's paper and attached them to the trike with tape.

She plays on a kazoo as she rides, singing `*defense de* fumer' over and over through the razzing pipe. The two gentlemen at her

parents' dinner table look at her, one over his packet of cigarettes and one over his pipe, in astonishment. Her mother, blushing

and frowning, picks up Mathilde from the trike and carries her wordlessly out of the sitting room. Her father hides the protest

vehicle in the kitchen. When Mathilde's mother doesn't return, the Doctor excuses himself from the dinner and goes to

look for them. He finds them outside, sitting on the edge of an unused concrete water trough, laughing so hard they can't

speak.

The annex to the Vignes farmhouse was barely a year old, still smelling of fresh paint and new carpet. But the rich smells of

the rest of the house had already permeated the fresh floorboards and the plastic. Sitting in the prim lounge down the corridor

from the labs, the Doctor could smell old stone, and Auvergne cooking, and centuries of milk and cream and cheese.

The Doctor inhaled gently. His senses were sharp enough to tell one chemical from another — the ketones and ammonia,

the amino acids and aldehydes, the butyric acid and the geosmin, all the molecules that made up the must of cheese. The

nearby labs leaked a smell of mould (the cold rooms), disinfectant (the floors), and — he wrinkled his nose — bad breath (one of the

cultures).

Beside him, in another of the orange plastic chairs scattered around the low coffee table, Inspector Toprak sat stiff- backed, her

deep black eyes constantly roaming the room. She didn't see what she wanted. If the answer to their mystery was anywhere it

was in the attached kitchenette, making coffee.

Mathilde Vignes came into the lounge with the cafetiere (2-methylvaleric acid, pyrazine, pyruvic acid, acetone). She put the

glass jug down on the coffee table hard, making Toprak flinch. Mathilde's forearms were strong, her face freckled, her dark hair

just starting to show grey. She plonked herself down in one of the plastic chairs and gazed at her visitors sourly.

`Well,' said the Doctor.

`Madame Vignes,' began Toprak.

`You people have been nothing but trouble for us right from the start,' said

Mathilde, stabbing a finger at Toprak. The BMB inspector sighed and sat back again. 'From the days of the raw milk

underground, when my mother's customers would wrap their cheese in six plastic bags and hide it in their handbag.'

`Well, all things have gone in very the other direction,' said Toprak in her dry and difficult French. 'Now anything

goes. Raw milk, contaminated milk, giraffes' milk. Engineered moulds. Germs from every place on Earth.' Mathilde

sniffed loudly. 'However, it is still against laws to transfer biological materials without the authorisation.'

Ànd now this insult. This accusation of theft.' Mathilde threw up her hands. `How can you let them do this to me,

Doctor?'

`Victoire asked me to involve myself,' he said. He took up the cafetiere and squeezed the plunger gently down.

Mathilde sniffed. 'When I first saw you together I thought she must be your

new travelling companion. Instead you bring a biocop into my home.' Toprak cleared her throat. 'Madame Vignes,'

she began again. `Mademoiselle. Read your own warrant.'

The Turkish official laced and unlaced her fingers nervously, but wouldn't be cowed. 'I have a simple biological probe

— reliable and quick. It has been calibrated to detect any trace of

the missing cultures.'

Ànd how do you get at the DNA without killing my cultures?' insisted Mathilde.

`The probe is calibrated for telltale surface proteins, not DNA,' explained Toprak. 'It's the same system Australia uses

for their citizenship test It's quite harmless.'

Mathilde dismissed Australia with a violent shrug. 'Why waste your money on that contraption? Why don't you just

ask the Doctor to follow his nose?'

Ì suppose you could say I'm already doing that,' said the Doctor carefully. Ì was visiting Victoire in Paris, when one

of her staff reported that a set of cultures had gone missing. I was hoping to see both ofyou, but I'd just missed you.

Victoire said you'd been there for a week. You'd left three days before they realised the cultures were gone.'

The simple statement hung in the air. For several seconds, none of them moved or spoke. Mathilde finally broke the

spell, slumping back in the plastic chair. 'You know you can search every centimetre of my laboratories. The cheeses, too,

you can search all of them with your little device. You've got the papers to do it. Besides, I've nothing to hide from you or

Victoire.' Toprak stood up, looking relieved. 'My assistants will show you everything.'

`Would you prefer to supervise?' said Toprak. 'You have that right'

Mathilde cut the air with her hand. 'I don't want to see.'

Toprak shuffled gratefully into the corridor that would take her to the labs and Mathilde's staff, a matching pair of

Swiss Ph.D. students. Mathilde waited almost until the inspector was out of earshot before she turned to the Doctor.

`Because I have a laboratory, that biocop thinks I'm one of the exotic experimenters. Anything goes. Inoculating

perfectly good milk with bacteria from hippo turds to feed bored gourmands. That sort of filth is Victoire's field, not

mine.'

The Doctor said mildly, 'Be fair, Mathilde. Victoire's programs model the interactions between microbes — her

equations can simulate those interactions thousands of times more quickly than any real-life experiment. And she

can simulate dangerous microbes without risk to anyone. Her work could save thousands of lives.'

Mathilde snorted. 'And earn her millions of euros. And her company masters, billions. She might as well be

playing with hippo turds.'

The Doctor sat forward. 'Those equations can do more than predict when bread will go off or how a stomach bug will

spread. They could be used to model the interactions in a barrel of milk. The cultures that disappeared were cheese-

making cultures, Mathilde. A mix of fungi and bacteria. They were part of an experiment to produce an imperishable

cheese. A way of storing milk indefinitely without refrigeration. The microbes themselves would keep the food fresh.'

Mathilde made a sharp motion with her hand. `Victoire's bugs would be useless to me. Come with me, *Oncle* Docteur.

Come.'

She marched out of the lounge. The Doctor picked up his hat and followed behind.

Mathilde went out of the labs, through the stone hallway of the old farmhouse, and out into the muddy evening.

The Doctor pulled on the wellies he'd left by the door and sloshed across the farmyard behind her. The lounge had been

warm and fluorescent-bright and pristine. Out here a cold wind was blowing between the centuries-old buildings, carrying

the smell of horses and chickens and wet grass. The sky was heavy and blank.

Mathilde went into a building that had been a stable once upon a time. Over a hundred years ago her family had

cleared the stone but out, and put it to use for the making of cheese. The Doctor had been there, had helped polish the

grey walls until they shone, had helped Mathilde and Victoire's great-great-something-grandfather drag newly made

barrels across the cobbles. He had visited many times since, watching the family business grow and prosper. They were

famous the world over for Vignes Premier Doux, a square soft-ripened cheese said to taste like champagne.

Sometimes he had helped with the cutting of the curd: dragging wooden paddles through the thickening milk, alive with

microbes. The room had had *the* same soft milky-sour smell. He was fairly certain they were still using the *same* barrels.

Mathilde drummed her fingers against the side of one of the barrels. Her hands were rough with years of working and

washing.

`You can't do this in a factory,' she began. It's too touchy. We have to have

our own milk, bring it here ourselves. We know the bacteria and the moulds that change it into cheese. But we can't

predict it all, it's too complicated. The wrong moulds may grow and ruin the cheese. Or something magical might

happen. Scientists call it witchcraft, chemistry you can't quantify.'

`The factor you can't predict,' says the Doctor, with a small smile.

She nods. 'Something that you can only detect with your nostrils and your palate after a lifetime of practice. It's

happened twice: two new kinds of cheese, never before smelled or tasted on this Earth. Award winners both. Can a

computer do that?'

`Possibly it could,' said the Doctor. 'If its model of the process was accurate enough.'

Mathilde snorted. 'We can't even predict the weather with a computer.' `You believe your sister can do it.' Mathilde

stared at him. 'Otherwise you wouldn't be so angry with her.'

Mathilde at the age of eight, dragging Victoire across a light fall of snow, leaving a long, narrow trail where her

younger sister tries to dig in her heels. She pushes Victoire into the front hallway of the farmhouse. The Doctor has been

watching this scene from the doorway.

`She was running away from home, Oncle Docteur!' Mathilde tells him indignantly. She turns to her sister. 'Because

maman yelled at you?'

`You yelled at me,' mutters Victoire.

Mathilde is pulling off her sister's backpack. 'Where did you think you were going? Did you know there are wolves in the

forest?'

`Don't be silly,' protests Victoire. 'They haven't finished growing them yet. Have they?' she asks the Doctor. He shakes

his head: Europe's new generation of wolves are still laboratory embryos.

`What's this?' Mathilde pulls half a carrot out of the backpack. 'Is this what you were going to live on? And this?' She

unwraps a rock-hard chunk of yesterday's honey cake.

Ì was going to have some of that on my birthday,' explains Victoire. 'Each year.'

Mathilde dumps the whole pack upside-down. Comic books rain onto the rug. `You didn't even think to bring any spare

knickers. Or a flashlight. Or —' Mathilde stares at the pile, appalled. Then she grabs Victoire by the arm, very hard.

'Ow!'

`How dare you!'

'Own!'

`You come with me.'

The Doctor trails after them. Mathilde would never hurt her little sister, but she isn't going to let her run off again,

either. They go into the kitchen, Victoire following sullenly now, not bothering to struggle.

Mathilde drags Victoire to the fridge with its ridiculous computer screen

showing images of Hawaiian flowers. She tugs open the door with her free hand, pulls out a plastic container the size of

a lunchbox, and slams it down on the counter.

She has let go of Victoire now, but her younger sibling just stands there. 'I hate you,' she says.

Mathilde tugs open the container. Inside is a large rectangular piece of Vignes Bleu, perched atop a sushi mat.

Mathilde snaps shut the container and stuffs it into the now empty backpack. She pushes it into Victoire's hands.

'There,' she says. 'Now you can go. Go out there and be eaten by wolves!' Victoire just stares at the backpack. Mathilde

gives her a push. 'Go!'

Victoire bursts into tears.

They waited for Toprak in the lounge. Mathilde brought out half a square of Vignes Premier Doux and some baked pitta

bread.

'It could be poisoned,' the Doctor joked.

Mathilde made a

comic face of shock at his blasphemy. Ìf I was going to poison you, Oncle, I'd put it in the coffee.'

They ate a few slices of the cheese, then a few more. The Doctor switched off the part of his mind that identified and

named the chemicals and just tasted. Vignes Premier Doux was satiny, tart, fruity... 'It really does taste of champagne,' he

told her.

She was too glum to hear it. Ì don't think I belong in this world any more.' The Doctor looked at her worriedly. 'I

don't mean that I crave to leave it. I mean that... it moves so quickly, it's like a rug pulled out from beneath the feet.

Soon computers will be making the cheese and writing the songs. You've seen the future, is that how it is? Are people

useless, does it not matter what we know and what we can do?'

The Doctor said, 'I've made a point of never inquiring into the future of the Vignes family. I'd rather see what happens

as it happens.'

One of the Ph.D. students knocked on the door and then made himself scarce. The BMB inspector stepped in,

packing away her bioprobe.

`Well?' said Mathilde, with the angry smugness of someone who knows she's innocent.

`Nothing,' Toprak reported. 'Not anything. Every culture we found was clean.'

`There is one more place we haven't looked,' said the Doctor.

The limestone cave, a couple of miles' walk from the farmhouse, was filled

with dozens of wooden racks. Each rack contained dozens of square cheeses.

The cave smelled of oncoming rain, and freshly tilled soil, and babies' breath.

Toprak stared at the racks of cheeses and said something rude in Turkish. 'This could take a long time.'

Ònly check the newest,' said the Doctor. 'The ones with the least rind mould — the light-coloured ones, nearest the

entrance.'

`Haven't you caused enough damage already?' said Mathilde. She had dismissed the Ph.D. students, insisting on

supervising the testing herself this time. 'Any smart buyer will know the cheese has *been* checked when they see the

mark. They won't want it.'

Toprak said nothing, only primed the bioprobe, sighed, and stepped forward to the first cheese. She punched a

centimetre cube out of the rind with the tip of the probe. Mathilde restrained her rage.

When Toprak moved to damage the second cheese, the Doctor put a hand on her shoulder. 'All right,' he said.

Toprak capped the probe and returned it to her zippered kit. Mathilde looked between them. 'I'm glad you've

come to your senses.'

`The fact is,' said the Doctor, 'the stolen cultures were only a red herring.' `What?' said Toprak.

`None of Victoire's microbes could survive outside the laboratory anyway.'

Mathilde looked at him for several long moments, different expressions flickering over her face. She finally settled on

rage. 'Then what's your excuse for this intrusion — this disruption — this false accusation!' She whirled on Toprak. 'By

God, I'll sue the Bureau for every cent it's got.' Back to the Doctor. `You're a friend. You *were* a friend. How could you be

part of this deception?'

The Doctor held up a hand. 'I said there were no stolen cultures. But something was stolen. Something

considerably more valuable.'

Mathilde gripped her hair in both hands. 'What, then? What?'

`Victoire's equations. The computer records show a copy was downloaded the day you began your visit.'

She stared at him for a few more long seconds, this time her face tightly under control. Then she reached into the

pocket of her apron, pulled out her PAN, and pushed the little electronic pad into his hands without a word.

`You'll have to unlock it for him,' said Toprak, but the Doctor was already operating the PAN, twitching his thumbs

faster than Toprak could follow.

`Quicker this way,' 137

murmured the Doctor. Mathilde stared at die cave floor, her greying hair hanging down over her

face, her hands turned to fists.

The Doctor's hands stopped their flickering movement. 'Nothing. It's not there.'

Mathilde looked up at him accusingly, her hair still masking her face.

`Not that that means anything,' he said gently. 'The equations could be anywhere.'

'We could check the computers in the lab,' said Toprak, reaching for her own PAN. 'I can phone through for an

extension to the warrant.'

Ànywhere,' repeated the Doctor. 'Every electronic device in Mathilde's house contains enough memory to hold the

equations. They could be in a refrigerator. They could be in a toothbrush. They could be at a friend's house or

In a locker at a train station. We could search forever and not find them, Toprak.' He reached out and touched

Mathilde on the elbow with a finger. `She'll have to tell us where they are.'

Victoire at the age of eighteen, bursting from the TARDIS into the Auvergne sunshine. 'Home! We're home! We're actually

home!'

The Doctor emerges from the TARDIS behind her, primly reknotting his tie. 'Was there ever any doubt?'

The family have heard the noise from inside and come rushing out to meet them. Mathilde wheels her mother across

the grass. Monsieur Vignes has already succumbed to the cauliflower virus; it will be five more years before his wife

follows him, her systems already maculate with tiny cancers. The engineered apples that carried the virus have long

been off the market, sparing the girls.

II Madame Vignes lets out a shriek when she sees her younger daughter. She 1

grabs Victoire by her arms and draws the angular young woman towards her,

staring at the long scar that marks her daughter's temple.

'Never mind, maman, it doesn't hurt,' says Victoire. 'We saved Europe! Perhaps the Earth!'

Madame Vignes looks intently at the Doctor. 'Is the human race safe again?' 'Thanks to the help of some of Earth's

foremost microbiologists,' says the Doctor.

' Victoire grabs the handles of her mother's wheelchair and starts pushing her back to the house. 'I'm dying for a cup

of coffee. I got into a fist fight with one of the Voltranons, maman! You should have seen me! That's how I got my War. I

have to tell you all about their spaceship!'

Mathilde and the Doctor are left awkwardly behind in the field. 'She seems to have rather enjoyed herself,' he said.

'Did you really save the human race?'

'We did. The Voltranons were ready to release a windborne plague. Always A popular plan when there's an awkward

native population to be got rid of It would have wiped out the human race.'

'Good God.'

'And all the surviving great apes. Actually, probably all the primates. I Possibly the insectivores. Never more a

shrew.'

Mathilde stares after her sister, not listening to his babble. 'I stayed here.'

'You had to look after your mother. That's what we agreed.' In fact, Mathilde had practically pushed Victoire into

the TARDIS, insisting she was the better scientist.

Something breaks in her and she sags down onto the grass. 'All I

did was make cheese.'

The Doctor crouches and places a finger against her elbow. `Mathilde, what you do is important.'

`No.'

`You're the culmination of centuries of skill and knowledge and talent. Of care and attention and pride. Without that,

what would be the point of saving the human race?'

Mathilde utters a shuddering sigh. 'That scratch on her face.'

`You should see the Voltranon,' he says gently, helping her to her feet. He feels the pump through her sleeve, reduced

to a flat black rectangle against her skin. 'Come on — you should hear the whole story.'

They begin moving towards the farmhouse. Mathilde is still far away, trying to grasp her role in it all.

The Doctor asks, 'Did you make me some ice cream?'

Òf course,' murmurs Mathilde.

Èxcellent.'

`Why this charade?' said Mathilde. 'Why look for something you couldn't find?'

Ì was hoping you'd give yourself away,' said the Doctor. It took her a moment to realise he wasn't talking to her.

`You can hand over the maths,' said Toprak, 'or you can stay here. In the cave.'

The Bureau woman was holding a small plastic pistol Mathilde stared at her. `You've got nerves,' said Toprak. 'You should

have been afraid when we came

to test your lab, confessed to the Doctor. So, directly, I am threatening you.' Ì see that, you idiot,' said Mathilde.

Ì don't think this is normal Bureau procedure,' said the Doctor mildly. `You will not be surprised to learn that I am

not an employee of the BMB,' said Toprak.

À real Bureau agent would never use a clumsy protein probe like that. It's strictly for hobbyists,' said the Doctor. 'Who

are you working for, then? Let me guess. Starts with a V?'

`We've been monitoring Victoire Vignes's work for twenty years. The scientist of humanity who stopped the first

invasion — only she would have the genius to make the second invasion a certainty.'

The Doctor said quietly, 'It won't work, Toprak. Human medical science will always cope with anything the

Voltranons can cook up.'

Toprak nodded, just a jerk of her chin, not taking her eyes off them. 'With these equations, they can turn Earth's own

microbes against the human race. Our own skin and gut bacteria will rot us.'

`That's revolting,' said Mathilde. 'Are you looking forward to it?'

`They'll take away a few thousand of us,' said Toprak. 'An elite. There is no ill health on their world. No germs, no

cancer, no diabetes. We will be in heaven and the Earth, that will be Eden again.'

Ìs any of that true?' said Mathilde.

Òf course it isn't,' said the Doctor. 'But our friend has had twenty years to come to believe it. I doubt she'll change

her mind now.'

`Fork over the numbers,' Toprak told Mathilde.

The Doctor nodded at Mathilde, his face grim. At the tip of a gun, you say yes. She sighed and started to roll up her

sleeve. The Doctor flinched as Toprak flinched, but she was only showing the fake inspector the insulin pump

attached to her upper arm.

'In the memory chip?' said Toprak. Mathilde nodded.

Toprak reached for the pump. The Doctor stepped forward carefully. 'She needs that.'

'I can do without it for a bit,' said Mathilde.

'Do you remember the time it had a battery problem,' said the Doctor, 'and you ended up eating all my jelly babies?'

He punctuated the remark by reaching out with his umbrella and smacking away Toprak's free hand. The agent

wheeled to shoot him. A piece of the cave wall exploded behind Toprak's head.

She ducked, swearing in Turkish, turning back again to shoot at whoever was firing at her. Mathilde had dropped to

the floor. The Doctor ducked, awkwardly, a little off-balance after the move with the brolly; he ended up on his knees

beside her, head bowed as he scrunched down.

Toprak's pistol flew out of her hand. Chris Cwej burst from behind a rack and came at her like a wide blond freight

train, shouting. Toprak stepped aside at the last instant. She grabbed a handful of Cwej's hair as he shot past her,

making him yelp, sending him crashing to the hard cave floor. He rolled and smacked one leg out from under her. She

caught herself on one hand, sweeping around to kick him. The Doctor hit her over the head with the handle of his

umbrella. She fell down, like a blanket tossed onto a bed.

There was a long moment where nobody moved, waiting to see if Toprak was going to get up.

'Ow! My knee!' said Chris. He clambered to his feet, rubbing his

bruised shin. He held out a hand to Mathilde, who

took it, bewildered.

`Can I come out now?' said a voice from somewhere in the forest of cheeses. it was Victoire, poking her head around

the mouth of a cave tunnel.

'It's all over,' said the Doctor. Chris was binding Toprak's limp form hand and foot with plastic cuffs.

'You were so certain,' Mathilde said to the Doctor. She seemed limp as a washed scarf hanging on the line. 'You knew

at once it was me.'

'Mathilde,' says the Doctor. 'You will always try to make people do what you think is right.'

Mathilde raised her head to look Victoire in the face. 'I am not sorry,' she said. `So now you must send me to prison.'

'Oh, don't be ridiculous!' said her sister. 'You must always make such a drama out of everything.'

The Doctor and Chris looked around, at the broken racks, the shot cheeses, Toprak. The cave smelled like

gunpowder and burned Camembert. But Victoire was saying, 'What were you going to do with the work?'

Mathilde ran a finger over the insulin pump, a slight bulge in her sleeve. `Make cheese, of course. Make a cheese with

a flavour that no judge will ever get out of their head.' Victoire already looked bored, but then Mathilde said, `Make a

cheese which is immune to *poils de chat.'*

`The hair of the cat mould?' said her sister. She followed Mathilde out of the cave, heading for the evening air.

Òne of the rooms became infected last year,' said Mathilde. 'We lost fifty cheese in a day. I thought, if I could find a

strain of fungus that would outcompete the hair of the cat...'

`Why not a synergistic strain? Something that would turn the mould into a helper?'

Chris hefted Toprak's limp form over his shoulder. The Doctor was searching for his hat in the wreckage,

looking dour. 'I'm afraid of what Victoire's equations could mean for Mathilde.'

`Could mean? You mean you don't know?'

Ì haven't gone forward to look. I'm not sure I want to. If Victoire really can predict microbial interactions, then Vignes

cheese could be made in a factory.'

`Well, wouldn't that be good?' said Chris, with thirtieth-century naivete. 'A lot more people could afford it.'

`True. But every cheese would be identical — a mass-produced, standard product. No more witchcraft.'

`Mathilde wouldn't stop doing it the old-fashioned way, would she?' said Chris. 'She's an artist.'

The Doctor pulled his hat from beneath a fallen rock and crammed it on his head. 'I hope you're right. Come on, let's

see if there's ice cream.'

The Baron Wastes

Alexander Leithes

I

Susan lay on her stomach, gravel shifting under her weight as she peered through binoculars at the scene below. The

artificial mountain gave her the perfect vantage point; from here she could see out beyond the aggregate plant she had

so recently broken into, across the road and into the abandoned yard beyond.

This was one of the few undeveloped industrial areas left on the Greenwich peninsular, most of the rest was given over to

desirable apartments of varying degrees of modernity and parkland established decades earlier, which served the nearby

commercial district of the Isle of Dogs. Just this small patch down by the river still retained the scruffy, desolate air once

so common across the whole peninsular.

It was not for nostalgia's sake that Susan watched the yard below however: for once, it was in use. She had been

tipped off that an illegal arms deal was to be conducted here — something almost unheard of in this day and age, and

yet this was precisely what she was witnessing. Three men stood around a battered electric pick-up truck, tarpaulin at

the back partly removed to reveal a frightening assortment of small arms and explosives. Susan needed at least one of

these men for interrogation, to find out who and what was behind these illicit arms movements. Reaching into her

jacket, she drew her weapon.

At that moment, a shot rang out and the gravel next to her face jumped into the air, making her flinch. There was a

cry: a fourth man, on the roof of an adjacent warehouse; a lookout for the men below. Susan took him out with a single

shot, already moving on to her second target as the dying man slid down the far side of the roof. Two of the three men

were already running towards her hiding place, their own silent needle rifles unslung, whilst the third was clambering

into the van, starting the engine in a bid to escape with his arsenal.

Susan allowed herself time to take careful aim, then fired straight

into a box of grenades. She turned, then with a

smile of satisfaction ran down the rear of the gravel mound, shielding herself from the earth-shaking explosion that

followed.

Needles now sung through the air around her, as Susan realised that both of her pursuers had survived the blast. Running

for her life she knew they were between her and her vehicle and so she made for the wooden fence

ahead, scaling it in a matter of seconds before dropping onto the Thames path beyond. This took her quickly out of the

tiny industrial zone, and into parkland. She hoped to reach a more populated area where she could throw off the

pursuit, possibly even capture one of the armed men. As it was, this side of the park was deserted, and both men were

too close to lose. She glanced behind her; the closest man was barely twenty metres away, but running too hard to

aim his rifle. His companion, obviously struggling in the chase, trailed another fifteen metres further back.

Susan sprinted on through tall mature trees, past lush grassy clearings then under the shadow of one of the older

apartment buildings. It had been built some forty years ago, and at the time its design had been considered quite

fashionable. Now, it was something of an embarrassment; but for Susan the cover it might afford outweighed any

aesthetic sensibilities. Unfortunately it offered no shelter, as between Susan and the flats lay a small but deep pond. Arms

pumping, hair streaming behind her, she hurtled onwards. Finally, she burst through the trees and onto the road

beyond. She did not stop as she made directly for the next set of apartments, a short way ahead. Her pursuer halted,

taking careful aim with his rifle. The last thing he heard was the faint rush of wind and the scrape of tyres, as the near-

silent electric bus smashed into his body.

Susan turned, and pointed her own gun in the direction of the last armed man while the driver and passengers

looked on in horror. The man was already out of range, heading back the way he had come and for freedom. Susan

swore as she holstered her weapon; no witnesses, no suspects, no one to question. Then she went over to comfort the

shaking, shock-stricken driver.

'Alien influence; contracts awarded to conglomerates whose faceless boards are impossible to track down; companies

whose infrastructures are spread throughout the so-called Greater European Union; all this leading to growing unease

and unrest on the streets of this once proud British nation. And who represents our interests? Yes, we have our votes, but

where do they go? Do we trust invisible grey bureaucrats to act in our best interests? Do we gee anything of our

government beyond our personal electronic voting terminals? Are our voices heard above the babble of a billion foreign

cries? No parliament of our own, no independent army. What is left of our identity? Oh, yes, they may have adopted our

tongue as the language of court, but is this not one more example of our ownership lost? In this reporter's humble

opinion, it seems only one voice is left crying out for our hopes and our dreams- the voice of our own British media. We

will continue to raise our voice, your voice, to speak for you, to force those in power to listen and to act!'

Charles Leyton sighed, shook his head and with a dismissive

wave switched off the Tri-Vision projector. He then leaned

back slowly in his brown leather swivel chair and turned to face the Doctor.

The Doctor himself was seated in an identical chair, and had been watching the news report intently. His hat was

clutched tightly in his right hand, but he was still dressed in his long brown coat and scarf. Charles had thought this a

little odd, given the warmth of his office and the fact that it was July; but the Doctor seemed perfectly comfortable. Now

he too settled back, crossing his legs whilst breaking into a broad grin.

`Well, there's nothing like a good piece of balanced journalism,' he said before pausing to waggle his hat. 'And that

was nothing like a good piece of balanced journalism.'

Charles smiled in spite of his mood. 'You might have thought that, as an "invisible grey bureaucrat", I might be

offended by this shameless piece of editorialising. But that's not the reason I called you here.'

As Director of Operations of the GEU Intelligence Ministry, Charles Leyton could well be described as an integral organ

of the bureaucratic beast; but it would have been grossly unfair to think him bereft of character or compassion. If

his manner betrayed some weariness or despair, it was simply because he cared about the fate of his people — the human

race — and not through some general ennui of the paper pusher.

`Have you seen the British Tri-Vision output recently?'

Àh,' the Doctor sighed, plonking his hat upon his head. 'Well, you see, I never really was into TV. I much prefer a

live performance, the smells, the sights, the wind through your hair, the smells. Did I mention the smells?'

Charles was forced to smile again.

`Yes, Doctor, I believe you did.'

Ìntoxicating,' whis 14

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ered the Doctor behind a conspiratorial hand.

`No doubt. However, had you not been so distracted by living history, I think you'd have found the reported version

somewhat at odds with your own experience.'

`How so?' the Doctor enquired.

`The news report I just showed you is not simply an isolated incident of one hack slipping through the editorial system,

but is essentially indicative of the whole British media. Tri-Vision, radio, internet content providers, even the few

remaining hardcopy productions: every arm of British journalism singing from one song sheet. And the tune is one of

discontent, racial prejudice and isolationism: all the things we've been fighting against for so many years.'

Charles finished, shook his head then ran his hand over his short-cropped hair.

assume the views expressed really do bear no resemblance to the truth?' the Doctor asked, one eyebrow raised. The

Director of Intelligence frowned.

Òf course not. They prey upon the worst paranoia of the populace. The European state as a whole enjoys prosperity

and peace, with representation for all. There has been a brief flirtation with increased localised government in parts of

London, but neither the residents nor the newly installed local

leaders were prepared for the chaos this created; by common consent, slowly but surely, they're on the way out. The

government structure and processes are as transparent as it is possible to make them and we have, over the past few

decades, attempted to educate the people to such a degree that they are able to consider the issues upon which they must

vote and make a rational choice.'

The Doctor flashed his dental work *once* more.

`Sounds perfect: I can hardly wait to experience this modern utopia! It seems everybody is working perfectly.'

Charles laughed ruefully.

Òkay, Doctor, you've got me. Nothing is perfect, sometimes there can be excesses of bureaucracy, but less than under

previous systems. These are a few minor annoyances in comparison to the chaos and profiteering of the past. For the

most part, we really do have government for the people by the people.'

Ìn which case I really don't see why you need me at all. Surely your educated populace should be able to see this biased

reporting for the funk it is?' the Doctor replied, patting his pockets and malting ready to leave. Charles leant over his

desk and put a gentle hand upon the Doctor's arm to stay his departure.

`Wait, Doctor. You know as well as I that just as no system is perfect, no one person is perfect either. This is why I am

concerned and why I need your help.' The Doctor settled back and removed his hat once more.

`The first problem is that people are still basically the same as they have always been, which is to say — to a greater or

lesser degree — lazy. Yes, through their education they have the ability to check the veracity of the news they receive but

many, perhaps even most, don't bother. Unchallenged and reinforced from every side, the seeds of paranoia take root

and suddenly they feel threatened by the many peoples they once called brothers and sisters. They see the need again

for a national government, for a national defence force, perhaps even the need to take up arms themselves against

the outlanders. These views we had hoped consigned to history, but I fear while yesterday they were proclaimed proudly

today they still lurk. just below the surface, ready to rise at the slightest provocation.'

`Yes,' the Doctor agreed cautiously. 'Education is a tricky business, and effecting change with it can certainly take

time.'

Charles nodded. 'And that brings me to the second problem. To a large degree, our media is our education system.

Only now it is operating contrary to our rational, cooperative and productive society.'

The Doctor looked a little suspicious. 'Yes; the free press can be such a problem.'

Charles showed a little impatience at this jibe.

`You know damn well I've no problem at all with a free press! My problem, indeed all our problems, Doctor, are that

the British press is anything but free.'

`From what you were saying about its educational properties, I'd begun to wonder if it was state controlled.'

`No, quite the opposite. It's all private, and what's worse all the major companies are owned by one man, James

Baron.'

Àh,' the Doctor said knowingly. 'One man, one voice. You think the isolationist propaganda springs from him?

But to what end? Who is this man?'

`That is what I wan 145

t you to find out, Doctor. I'll tell you all I can about him, but...'

At this Charles frowned and looked at his watch. He glanced towards the door and sighed impatiently. 'I really don't

know what can be keeping her,' he muttered to himself.

`Her?' the Doctor asked, also frowning. 'If I might enquire, to whom are you referring?'

The director looked up and for a second became the sheepish schoolboy caught whispering in class.

Àh, my apologies, my friend. I hadn't realised I'd spoken aloud. She is Susan King, Dr Susan King, and she's our

foremost expert on the character and mind ofJames Baron. No one knows him better than her, and in addition, she is

one of our best field agents. Fortunately for our purposes here today, her doctorate is in psychology.'

The Doctor leaned forward, a look of awe upon his face. 'A psychologist? At lasd' he cried. 'A woman who'll know me

better than I know myself!'

With that he threw himself back in his chair and swung his feet up onto Leyton's desk. 'I can hardly wait,' he

confided toothily.

As if the Doctor had perfect vision of the future, at that moment there came a knock at the door.

Ènter,' Charles Leyton ordered gravely.

The woman glided into the room, tall and slender, graceful as a cat with that same feline aura of self-control, at ease yet

deadly. Her hair was long and unbound, and framed a delicate face that belied the steel in her blue eyes. She smiled

slightly and nodded to the director.

`Sorry I'm late, sir. I was tied up with some trouble in town.'

Charles smiled. 'That's perfectly all right,' he replied before turning to the Doctor. 'Even today, our public

transport system still suffers from the occasional glitch.'

An odd expression passed across Susan's face, which caught the Doctor's eye. Nothing was said however and so the

moment passed. Susan's gaze remained fixed upon the Doctor, studying him, evaluating, sizing him up. The Doctor's

assessment was made with a studied dispassion such that it could have been the very form of sang-froid.

'So, Charles, I assume this is the outside help you mentioned earlier? Are you going to introduce us?'

The Director of Intelligence nodded agreeably. 'Of course, of course. He is a... relic, you might say, from the old UNIT

teams; back when UNIT really meant something. Dr King — meet the Doctor.'

Susan extended her hand towards the Doctor. 'I'm delighted to meet you. Clearly Director Leyton holds you in high

regard, but I'm intrigued; who exactly am I meeting and of what are you a doctor?'

The Doctor examined the hand for a moment before rising to his feet, grasping it firmly and shaking the limb twice

with some vigour. He then dropped it abruptly and asked, 'So, my dear, what do you know of our Mr Baron?'

If Susan was at all surprised or upset by the Doctor's rather uncouth dismissal of her questions, she betrayed no

hint of it. Instead she merely produced a small plastic wafer, moved over to the Tri-V unit and inserted it.

An image appeared in glorious three-dimensional technicolour of a man stepping from a light aircraft.

`James Baron, a man out of time,' she announced. 'Just when we expected the media companies to follow the trends in

other businesses towards broad private ownership through many hands, this man seemed to come from nowhere to

set back the clock by half a century. He acquired first one then eventually all the main corporations in the British

media.'

Here Susan paused almost imperceptibly, though it seemed to register with the Doctor.

`No one is sure what prompted this sudden rise from relative obscurity to media mogul but — despite some clever

attempts to hide his acquisitions through ghost companies and offshore accounts — it's clear that he is the power

behind them all.'

This time the pause was more deliberate, to heighten the impact of her words. It was clear she was no stranger to

the tricks of the orator and the journalist.

`Physically, one cannot deny that he is... impressive. Six foot tall, competent in many sports — mostly martial in nature

— competition standard in more than one, at thirty-nine he is still extremely fit and active. Given his dark brown hair

and — to some — good looks, if you knew no more than this you'd think him simply some pretty playboy, but we, of

course, have far more on him than that. Educated at Warwick University, his undergraduate degree was in philosophy,

where he showed a particular aptitude for both logic and the philosophy of science, graduating with first class honours.

Perhaps unusually for someone with his gifts he then elected to study journalism for a year, before beginning a career

in that field. Due to his background he was usually either asked to be a science correspondent, or chosen to write some

of the more thought-provoking articles in the Sunday supplements. His work was intelligent and insightful, and he was

well respected by his peers. As a consequence, he went largely unnoticed by the wider public, no glitz, glamour

or fame attaching itself to him, but his work was precisely what we might hope the media should be: subtly, stealthily

coaxing the public to think for themselves. This he did for eleven years and seemed content. Then, suddenly, he was going

after the high-profile, high-paid, low-integrity work — showbiz, sex-scandals, prurient exposés dressed up as political

pieces — the acquisition of wealth and personal fame, even notoriety, seemed his only goals. Then just as suddenly he

vanished from the hubbub of Wapping's front line. He began to carve out an empire in the business side of news, and

with far more discretion than the earlier garnering of his modest personal fortune. Almost without our noticing, he rose

to the position where he now dominates the media world.'

As Susan paused for breath, Charles took the opportunity to cut in.

'But we still don't understand his motivation; why has he acquired so much power? Given the increasingly belligerent

isolationist tone of his companies' output, we're understandably worried.'

The Doctor sat with an odd, fixed stare, as Win some trance-like meditation. Then, suddenly, violently, he shook

himself, giving every impression of having missed all that had been said. His next words dispelled the

impression, at least to a degree.

'So, a little sniffing around is in order then; some judicious probing, eh? To see what we can shake loose. I'm sure Miss

King and I can satisfy you there,' he said briskly while standing, donning his hat and brushing down his coat.

'Doctor,' Susan corrected.

'Yes?' he enquired before continuing. 'Come along: we have no time to lose.'

He paused for a moment, gazing at some envisioned distant horror. 'I fear the very future of this society may

be at stake.'

Now the Doctor was on the move once more, heading towards the door. Susan grabbed at his wrist, detaining him.

'But Doctor, surely we need a plan of action?'

'My dear Susan, the best plan of action is action!' he exclaimed then was gone, door swinging slowly closed in his wake.

It took a moment for Susan to wrench herself free from his mesmeric influence and dismiss his last words as gibberish. She

spent only a few seconds more confirming details with Charles.

'If you're going up against an eccentric like Baron, you might as well leave your PAN behind. From what I hear, none

of his businesses run the system. Just stick to standard ID cards,' was his last piece of advice.

Susan nodded curtly before making her own rapid exit.

The Doctor was a good thirty metres away from Susan and receding fast, long loping strides devouring the ground, coat-

tails and scarf licking the walls as he passed. Susan was forced to jog to catch up, calling out to attract his attention.

`Doctor, will you just wait one second?'

Òf course! Perhaps even two.'

`Fine. Do you have any idea where you are going?'

`Naturally I have some idea,' the Doctor replied, smiling.

Susan was unconvinced. 'Well?'

`Clearly it is imperative that we find Mr Baron's centre of operations.' Ànd how did you intend to find it?'

The Doctor beamed at Susan. 'Well, I thought I'd ask a policeman.'

Susan put her hands on her hips and nodded slowly. 'Really. Well, had you considered asking an Intelligence Ministry

Field Agent?'

The Doctor doffed his hat to her. 'Excuse me, officer, I've reason to believe a media tycoon with possible

megalomaniacal tendencies has been spotted in the area. Would you happen to know where I might find him?'

Susan half-suppressed a smile. 'Well, sir, if you take the first bus to the Isle of Dogs then you'll find the newly

constructed HQ of Baron Enterprises.'

`Well, thank you, officer, I'll be on my way then,' the Doctor concluded, doffing his hat once more and making to

leave. Susan now grasped his shoulder and said, 'Not so fast, sir, I think you'll have to accompany me to the station.'

The Doctor cocked his head. 'The station?'

Susan fell out of role. 'Er... well... no. But I do want you to come to our rooms. They have been set aside for us in the

accommodation win 148

g of this building.' 149

The Doctor revealed some irritation. 'This is always the way with companions, no matter how charming; they

always slow you down.'

`Perhaps that isn't always such a bad thing,' Susan replied calmly. 'It might do you some good to learn to be more

accommodating of others. And besides, while I pick up my equipment I can fill you in with some more details of our

quarry.'

The Doctor paused, as if struck by a momentary thought. 'Yes, perhaps there is a good reason to go there after all.

Come along then. Lead on, Mac King!'

II

The Ministry of Intelligence was based in the former Greater London Council building and — in the accommodation wing at

least— plush red carpets, subtle lighting and brass fittings lent it the impression of an old five-star hotel. At the reception

desk the concierge-cum-Internal Security Agent had informed Susan and the Doctor that their rooms lay on the second

floor and handed them their key-cards. To the now-energised Doctor's annoyance, Susan elected to take the lift. He

whistled an annoyingly simple tune to himself as the rather antiquated device bore them upwards. Finally the doors

opened and

they stepped out into a short corridor, which had an identical lift at its other end. A second corridor led from the first

midway along its length. As they reached this junction and made to turn into it, the Doctor found his progress stayed

by a hand against his chest. Susan was peering around the corner into the adjoining corridor. Seeing the Doctor

now safely arrested, she removed the hand and slipped it inside her suit. From within she drew a long-muzzled

Walther P38 that must have been at least fifty years old, holding it barrel upwards. The Doctor frowned at it.

'You may have heard of my penchant for antiquities, but couldn't you have shown this to me in the comfort of our

rooms?'

Susan pursed her lips at the Doctor. 'I too have a soft spot for the classics, and I can assure you that this is quite a

practical one. I certainly find it more reliable than these modern electrical or energy-based side arms, and much less

liable to external interference,' she said in a low voice. Anticipating a response from the Doctor she held up a finger.

'And this is not show and tell; something is wrong. Look,' she said nodding to the opening beside

1. them.

The Doctor leaned slowly over to peer down the corridor beyond. It was totally empty, with doors on either side at

regular intervals. Against the far end wall there was a single reproduction Chippendale chair. The Doctor leaned

slowly back again to face his companion.

Àh, yes, of course. Chairs can be terribly threatening.'

'Particularly when they are missing their assigned security personnel,' she hissed angrily. After checking out the

corridor again she then began sidling down it staying close to the left-hand wall. The Doctor watched her for a

moment then shrugged, stuck his thumbs into his pockets and ambled down t h e c o r r i d o r

a f t e r h e r .

Finally they reached the door marked 208: Susan's room. A little way beyond It lay door 209, the Doctor's apartment.

Susan now examined the edge of her door where it met the frame, crouching now to check the tiny gap between the door

and floor.

'I've subdued it!' the Doctor called out cheerfully.

`Shh` Susan hissed as she turned to see what he was talking about. The Doctor was standing, exuding triumph, at

the far end of the corridor while next to him, on its side and bound by his scarf, was the chair. Susan rolled her eyes,

shook her head and returned her attention to the door. There were no obvious signs of tampering on it or on the key-

card slot adjacent to it. In spite of this she spread herself flat against the wall, as far from the slot as she could reach before

taking the key-card from her pocket and inserting it gingerly with her fingertips. As it slid home, there was a faint

click as the lock disengaged and a satisfying lack of accompanying explosion. She sighed and pivoted to face the door once

more, reaching for the handle.

Susan found herself on her back covered by a large mass in a brown coat, floppy hat and recently recovered scarf. The

mass raised its head and looked relieved. The Doctor released the breath he had been holding and mopped his forehead with

his hat. He then replaced it and looked down at Susan, who returned his jovial expression with an icy stare.

`Doctor, do you have something to prove?'

The Doctor looked thoughtful.

`Why, yes, I believe I do,' he said before rising to his feet and offering her his hand. Susan frowned at the

proffered appendage before standing unaided.

`Just what do you think you're playing at?' Susan demanded, distinctly unimpressed.

`Look at the door handle.'

Susan did this.

Ìt's a brass door handle,' she reported coolly.

`Look at all the handles,' the Doctor suggested gravely. Susan looked up and down the corridor; on every door she

could see an identical knob gleaming under the artificial lights. Then she returned her gaze to her own door handle,

also identical to all the others. Then a niggle began to work at the back of her mind; it was not quite like the others, it did

not gleam quite as brightly. There was an ever-so-slight cloudiness to the surface, as if it had been lightly breathed

upon.

'A Visking membrane!' she gasped as the recognition dawned. The Doctor nodded.

'No doubt attached to a sensor, which is in turn attached to...'

'A bomb,' Susan finished for him. 'The membrane specifically detects the touch of a human hand,' she continued.

'Alien technology. Just let me get my gloves.'

'Allow me,' the Doctor offered, reaching his own bare hand towards the handle. Susan, caught halfway through

retrieving her gloves, could do nothing to prevent him and so threw herself flat on the ground. The Doctor opened the

door.

'I'm sure you'll find a bed inside, you know,' he told her. Susan watched with a mixture of annoyance and awe as

he entered the room. She rose to her feet and followed. The Doctor was standing behind the door studying the

device he had just detached from it. Susan looked at him with some wariness.

'You' re. . '

'Not human?' the Doctor asked, completing her sentence. 'Yes, I think you could safely say that.'

'I've never worked with an... alien before.'

'Really? Are you sure?'

The Doctor concluded his question with a characteristic and unnervingly

broad exposure of teeth. Susan regarded the Doctor for a second longer before shrugging and smiling herself 'I

guess not.'

She quickly rang down to security to report the breach and the missing guard.

Ìt's safe,' the Doctor said as she put down the receiver. He threw the device to her with one hand while pocketing an

odd-looking instrument of his own with the other. Susan examined the collection of technology and explosives closely.

Ìt's definitely a bomb,' she said smirking at the Doctor. 'But I've only ever come across aliens using this type ofdevice

in the past; the general population aren't supposed to know this stuff exists. But why would any alien be interested in

me?'

Then, as an afterthought, she added, 'Unless they were after you?'

`Well, I suppose there may be one or two aliens who'd like to see me come to grief, but I doubt they'd know I'm here

now. Are you sure no humans could have employed this technology?'

Susan considered the possibility.

Ì suppose, logically, there's no reason why human assassins couldn't have acquired the technology. But why go to all

this trouble?'

The Doctor paced across the room. `To throw you off the scent, or those sent to investigate our untimely demises?'

Susan refused to meet his eye.

Ì should have told you this before, but the reason I was delayed earlier was because I was on a surveillance job, which

failed. I was watching some low-level employees of Baron Enterprises involved in arms smuggling. All perfectly

deniable, working on their own time as it were; no way of linking their activities to James Baron or anyone else in his

organisation. They may well have been working to some private agenda; we could be totally wrong about James; he

might simply be an opinionated but perfectly legitimate businessman. We might have known for certain if I'd been

able to take those men alive.'

She looked up now, directly into the Doctor's eyes.

Ì think we may be involved in something very dangerous here, Doctor.'

Ì wouldn't worry yourself, my dear. There's nothing like a spot of danger to remind you why you shouldn't have left

home this morning.'

Susan laughed and was about to respond when the Doctor suddenly asked, `How well do you know James Baron?'

She froze then turned away.

`Better than I'd like,' she replied distantly then she shook herself out of her mood and told him, 'I have to get

changed. Come with me to the bedroom and I'll bring you up to speed.'

The Doctor cocked his head on one side.

Àre you entirely sure that's proper?'

At this Susan giggled.

`Doctor, this is the forties, not the noughties. If you feel uncomfortable at any point you can just avert your eyes,

you know.'

The Doctor followed Susan into the bedroom. Susan made him sit on the edge of the bed. Then she moved to the

wardrobe and looked inside.

Àh, good, they delivered it.'

Susan reached in and recovered a black catsuit, short-cropped burgundy leather jacket and a black string bag. Each

of these she tossed in turn onto the bed beside the Doctor. As she did this he said, `So, I get the impression that Mr

Baron is more to you than just another assignment.'

`Was,' Susan corrected as she removed her jacket and began to disrobe. 'I met him after a lecture I gave on

forensic psychology; he was covering it for *The* Times with a view to writing an in-depth piece on the subject. We got

talking, went on for drinks. He was very intelligent, very honest and, I must admit, very funny. He obviously loved

what he was doing, and in time it became clear that he loved me. We were together for three years.'

By now Susan was down to her eminently practical black sports bra and similarly functional matching briefs. The

Doctor had been studying the fine paintwork on the walls and ceiling.

`He sounds perfectly charming. Why on earth did you break up?'

Susan came and sat beside the Doctor on the bed, looking at him

with curiosity. The Doctor turned his head to meet

her gaze.

`Doctor, haven't you ever met someone you admired a great deal, were attracted to on one level, but weren't in love

with?'

The Doctor smiled faintly.

Àlmost certainly.'

Susan leaned towards the Doctor, her eyes closing as he lips parted. Their progress was impeded by the finger gently

placed against them.

'I'm sorry, my dear,' the Doctor said gently in a low voice. 'I'm sure you must be very attractive but... well, things

are complex with my race.'

Susan pulled away a tiny amount but was smiling playfully.

Ì've no problem with complexity; variety is the spice of life.'

The Doctor laughed.

Àbsolutely, but I'm afraid this is an impossible variation that cannot be played.' He cleared his throat. 'We should

really be on our way.'

Susan looked slightly put out then gave a now familiar shrug.

Às you say Doctor, we've a job to do, and I guess there's no time for games,' she said as she stood up and began to

don the black catsuit.

Òh, I can't agree with you there; there's always time for games. It's simply a question of which is afoot.'

By now Susan was fully clothed and had just put her arms through the strings of her bag.

`Well, I personally hope to be afoot for as short a time as possible. It's quite

a way to the Isle of Dogs, and I've had enough jogging for one day.'

'Then we must away!' the Doctor cried dramatically before disappearing

from the room. A moment later his head reappeared round the door. 'Perhaps you had better lead the way,' he

said sheepishly.

As they stepped from the former GLC building into the hazy early evening sun, the Doctor was struck by the

cleanliness and emptiness of the road in front of them. The spotless, seamless tarmac was bordered on both sides by

pairs of pretty red bands, and it was with an eerie infrequency that the odd electric vehicle glided past the Doctor

and his companion. Ruthless congestion controls had chased all but public vehicles, the most wealthy or the most

desperate off the streets at almost any time, while the exhaustion of crude oil had eliminated the combustion engine

entirely. The black '72 Mustang Fastback parked with gleeful abandon in front of the Ministry came as something of

an eye-twisting anachronism. It had been dumped with a total disregard for the parking restrictions, two wheels on

the pavement, its ridiculously wide body straddling the double red lines like some ancient dinosaur preparing to

devour them. The Doctor looked at Susan, who he realised had been watching his reaction.

'It's mine,' she said simply.

'But what about the rules, Dr King? After all where would society be without *them?'* the Doctor asked with feigned

shock.

'Well, technically it's a government vehicle, or at least one used by a government employee while working.'

The Doctor simply regarded her with one eyebrow lifted. Susan looked marginally uncomfortable.

'Look, Doctor, I realise that our society may seem overly ordered — and therein, of course, lies its strength — but we're

still human; we're not all totally straight. So I use my position for this little perk, but weren't we just discussing the need

for some spice?'

'You've no need to convince me; my own vehicle has been referred to as obsolete by some insensitive souls. By the way,

you've got something stuck to your wheel.'

Susan looked down.

'Jesus Christ! Why do they never check the reg against records?' she exclaimed as she regarded the clamp with

disdain. She pulled her keys from her pocket and pressed a button set into the fob. With a clunk the clamp released and she

lifted it free from the wheel, dumping it unceremoniously on the pavement.

'Litter bug,' the Doctor jibed.

'Another perk,' Susan retorted with a tiny smirk. She reached for the driver's door handle while the Doctor

walked to the passenger side. As he

opened the door he commented, 'I must say, this doesn't seem very discreet for a secret agent.'

Susan shook her head.

Ì'm a field agent, not a secret agent; there is a difference. I'm on the public record as working for the MI, if anybody

cares to look.'

They got in the car.

'So,' the Doctor said, examining the interior, 'how exactly does this contraption run? Haven't we run out of

petrol?'

`We may well have, and so I had to compromise and replace the engine.' 'Ali, so it's an electric car.'

Susan depressed the accelerator slightly and turned the key. The Doctor was startled as a roar burst forth from under

the bonnet, which settled to a low burbling rumble.

`Not exactly,' Susan told him. 'It's a 6.7 litre turbo-diesel V8 running on biofuel. Vegetable oil, Doctor.'

Èngland's yellow unpleasant land,' the Doctor said, recalling the large tracts of countryside beyond the urban

sprawl. 'Give me Bessie any day!'

He grabbed his hat as they roared off through the pristine streets of London.

Susan parked the car a hundred metres from the base of Baron Enterprises' almost-completed skyscraper. Already

many of the building's lower floors *were* occupied; however, the upper levels were still in the process of being finished

while the windows of the top two floors were covered by transparent polythene sheets that flapped gently in the evening

breeze.

The sun was already below the horizon, and the black silhouette of the tower stood out ominously against the pink

of the dusk.

`So, any ideas as to how we should approach this?' Susan asked

the Doctor. `Well, I've always favoured the front door

myself.'

The withering look she gave him made clear her feelings on the matter. Then her expression altered as a realisation

dawned.

`That might not be such a bad idea. This is a new building, yes?'

The Doctor nodded. 'And new buildings require inspection, do they not?' he supplied helpfully.

`By government inspectors.'

Ànd you're a government inspector.'

Ànd in a moment I'll even be working for the right Ministry.'

With that Susan took a palm-held computer from her bag and her ID card from her purse. She slotted the card into

the computer and began typing away on the tiny keypad.

`Perfect,' she said absently as she returned both card and computer to their respective homes.

`Follow my lead,' she then ordered as they left the car.

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The crystal plates of the automatic doors slid noiselessly back allowing both the Doctor and Susan to stride boldly

through. As they did, Susan glanced down at the plain black welcome mat, which quickly gave way to highly polished

marble stretching all the way to the altar of the reception desk. Behind this sat a grey-suited guard whose expensively

coiffured hair blended seamlessly into the lines of his clothes.

`Good evening, sir, madam — welcome to Baron Enterprises. How might I help you?'

He was at once courteous yet with a certain aura of firm menace,

an impression he must have spent his whole

career cultivating. Susan responded rather shortly, perhaps prickled by the Doctor being addressed before her.

Ì'm with the Ministry of Health. I'm here to perform a spot building inspection to assess the quality of the completed

sections and the safety of the construction areas.'

As she said this she presented her ID card to the guard. A quick scan revealed all to be in order.

Àn d him?' the guard asked nodding at the Doctor, who raised his hat and presented the guard with a broad toothy

grin. Susan narrowed her eyes slightly at the Doctor before saying, 'He's my assistant.'

`Seems harmless enough,' was the guard's assessment.

`Mostly, yes,' Susan responded quickly. 'We'll need full access to all areas of the building of course.'

Òf course,' replied the guard. 'Except for one or two high security rooms, sealed with coded locks.'

Susan adopted what was clearly her best officious bureaucrat persona. 'I really must insist that we have access

to all areas.'

Àn d I have orders that no one is allowed access to those rooms, and until I see written orders from your bosses and

my bosses that's the way it'll be. If you insist on causing a fuss, then, Ministry or not, I'll remove you from the building

until I receive those orders.'

The Doctor could sense his companion was going to push the matter and so quickly intervened. 'I'm sure that'll be fine.

We'll stick to the path; we can always inspect the other areas another day.'

A second set of glass doors to the left of the desk now slid open.

`That'll do nicely.' The guard nodded towards this new opening. The Doctor and Susan entered with as much haste as

they thought seemly.

They passed along office-lined corridors, ignoring many until Susan dragged the Doctor into what looked like a

newsroom.

`What exactly do you hope to find here?' the Doctor asked.

`There's a computer terminal in a cubicle over there in a blind spot on the security cameras,' she said tetchily,

pointing to both booth and cameras. For some reason her mood seemed out of character for an experienced field agent.

Àre you feeling all right, my dear?' the Doctor asked.

`Fine. Come on.'

They walked over 15

to6 **the cubicle, diligently checking every possible health and safety infraction until they were out of**

view of security. Susan hurriedly sat down at the terminal and connected her palmtop.

`Basic level protection guards the general newsroom material; nothing but half-finished pieces and archives here,' she

told the Doctor. She tapped a few more keys.

`There is a protected high-security area; give me a second.'

As she said this she set off a cracker program, then she began to settle back to wait. Her body stiffened, stopping

just short of the chair back before shifting forwards once more.

`That was quick,' Susan muttered, clearly unsatisfied with the results. She pored over the files now revealed to her,

then turned to face the Doctor, her countenance heralding bad news.

`There's nothing but accounts here, and from my cursory inspection they're all in order. I can't find anything

untoward.'

`Well, no matter how much they trust your Ministry ID, I doubt they'd allow us access to anywhere they didn't want

us to be.'

Susan frowned. `So, where to now?'

`Why, to wherever we shouldn't be.'

At this, the Doctor turned and strode out of the room and back into the corridor. Susan stood up hurriedly and

trotted after him. At the far end of the corridor stood two devices of quite different designs but with a common

purpose. The first was a standard mechanical lift. Beside this stood the next generation, an AG—Maglev Floater: a rare

piece of advanced technology, and a symbol of Baron Enterprises' wealth and forward thinking. These car-less tubes

were designed to levitate individuals in a controlled manner to their destination. The tubes worked in pairs, both

openings adjacent to one another — left for up, right for down. The passenger was gently wafted at a sedate pace

until he reached the desired floor whereupon, by touching a pressure pad set into the wall, his progress was halted

long enough for him to push himself out. There were many redundancies built into every system and there had never

been an accident in commercial use, but man still held an inherent distrust of having nothing beneath his feet — hence

the creaking antiquity of the lift, the parent watching over its child.

As it was, this particular child was grounded, 'Under Construction' tape crossed over both openings, forcing Susan

and the Doctor to opt for the lift. Once inside, the Doctor studied the panel of buttons.

`Well?' Susan asked impatiently, hopping from one foot to the other. The Doctor peered over his shoulder at her, one

eyebrow raised.

Ì've been told patience is a virtue.'

Ì'm not feeling particularly virtuous today,' Susan retorted, affording the Doctor a brief smile.

There were sixty-three floor buttons in addition to the ground and basement, but someone had taped a sheet of

A4 paper next to those for thirty and higher with the words 'Danger — Construction' scrawled on it in black marker.

`Sixty-three floors, eh? An odd number to pick,' the Doctor commented. `That number plus the radio mast make it

the highest building in London.' The Doctor adopted a mischievous expression. 'Ha, now there's a man with

something to prove.'

Susan did not share his humour, giving him a hard stare. 'I wish I could say it was so.'

The Doctor studied her. 'You still have some feelings for him, don't you?' Susan shook her head. 'No, but I do still

have feelings for accuracy and the truth.'

The Doctor cocked his head on one side, making some internal reassessment. 'I'm sorry. Of course.'

Then he pointed at one of the buttons. 'By the way, look what I found.' Susan glanced at the end of the Doctor's

extended digit and saw button twenty-one. It seemed no more special than the others. 'So?'

The finger now jabbed the button. The lift remained motionless.

Àh,' Susan said as she noticed the electronic key-card slot next to

the button. 'Not a problem,' she continued

whilst pulling out her palmtop and inserting a key-card interface. After a few moments she said, 'Try it now.'

Cautiously this time, the Doctor slowly depressed the button. The doors closed and they were gliding smoothly

upwards. Susan drew her gun but the Doctor put his hand upon it.

`Let's not get ahead of ourselves here. Best save that until we really need it.'

Susan looked unconvinced but replaced it in her shoulder holster.

The doors opened 15

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into a long corridor. The left-hand wall contained several doors leading to various store cupboards

and other mundanely functional moms. The right wall, however, appeared to conceal one enormous chamber since the

top half consisted of heavily frosted glass allowing the vague suggestion of shapes within. There was only one door

set into this at its midpoint. They reached this swiftly and the Doctor slid it open to reveal what lay beyond.

Row upon row of grey cabinets, all a metre and a half tall, stretched into the distance until they stopped just short of

the far wall. At that point the companions could just make out a large semicircular desk, covered in keyboards

and monitors, set before the black expanse of the wall itself. As they walked between the rows towards the desk, Susan

looked about her in disbelief.

`There must be enough computer power here to run half the world.'

`Half the galaxy,' the Doctor replied. Susan looked at him strangely.

Òh, you'd be surprised how little it actually takes,' the Doctor said and left it at that.

Arriving at the console Susan and the Doctor both took seats whereupon Susan began to hack into the system. The

Doctor divided his attention between watching her efforts and examining the console itself. He was distracted from

this when Susan sat back violently, ran her hands through her hair and drummed her feet upon the floor.

`Doctor, look.'

The data was as clear as it was unbelievable. Entry after entry detailing individual arms acquisitions and

distributions, all under the cover and control of Baron Enterprises' local offices and news desks.

The Doctor watched as Susan scrutinised the files more closely and duly found the reference to the arms deal she had

disrupted earlier, along with the names of the staff involved. She paused for a moment, perhaps wondering which was

the name of the one that got away. In all likelihood he would also prove to be the would-be bomber.

Ìt would appear the Baron is caparisoned for war,' the Doctor observed.

`He's planning a coup,' Susan said in stunned awe. 'No matter how much he's changed, I'd have never have believed

him capable of this. What could have driven him so far?'

The Doctor was no longer listening to what she was saying, however. The moment they had begun accessing the files, a

red button on the console had winked on and had been glowing faintly. The Doctor was transfixed, then almost

against his will, his finger reached out and pressed it.

`Doctor!' Susan cried out in alarm but was quickly silenced by the sight unfolding before her. Two great panels in

the wall were sliding back to reveal a large map of the British Isles. It was dotted with bulbs showing the company holdings,

roughly two thirds being lit — those corresponding to completed entries in the files. All these bulbs were linked

through faintly glowing threads to a large glowing silhouette of Baron Enterprises Tower.

`You've got to be kidding,' was Susan's unreserved assessment.

Ìt is a tad ostentatious, isn't it?' the Doctor responded. Susan looked him in the eye, seeming unusually agitated.

`Doctor,' she said with an almost desperate, pleading note.

He leaned forward eagerly. 'What is it? You seem pained; do you have some dread confession?'

Susan shook her head and looked slightly sheepish. 'Not exactly. You saw the other rooms in the corridor?'

`Yes,' the Doctor nodded.

`Did you notice whether one of them was a convenience?'

Ì do believe there was one.'

Susan gave a single nod of recognition. 'I'll be back in a minute.'

The Doctor remained frozen in thought for a moment before smiling indulgently.

Àh, humans.'

The Doctor turned his attention back to the files. He heard the door as Susan left the room. He paid it no mind

when he heard it again a minute later. The monitor to the left of him erupted in a blinding, ear-rending anarchy of

sparks and glass shards. The Doctor was thrown sideways by the force while on his left arm each hair stood stiffly to

attention, the telltale signature of a Directed Charge Weapon. He threw himself behind the nearest server cabinet, and

it shuddered and arced under the thunderous impact of another charge.

Deadly as DCWs were, their accuracy was famously unreliable as their energy discharges were often drawn or

pushed off-target by large metal or charged objects. This was the only reason the Doctor still lived. He decided

discretion was the better part of valour, and surrender the best part of discretion. He waved his hat above the

server cabinet.

Èxcuse me, but I thought you might like to know I surrender,' he called to his unidentified assailants. A thought

struck him: where was Susan King? A sickening feeling threatened to overwhelm him as he considered her former

relationship with James Baron. Had she been with her old lover all along? Had she slipped out only to bring these death

dealers to him?

`Get out here now,' a gruffand very male voice ordered in a broad south-east London accent. The Doctor rose and

turned, arms raised, hat still clutched in his hand. His fears about Susan were at least partly assuaged by the sight of

two burly armed guards facing him, but not entirely.

Ì seem to be a little lost,' the Doctor supplied affably. Neither guard looked impressed.

`You're coming with us.'

`So it would seem,' the Doctor agreed as he allowed them to show him back to the lift with enthusiastic physicality.

Both guards were shaven-headed, a microscopic layer of stubble

covering their scalps. Physically they were very similar,

one being perhaps an inch shorter than the other but still taller than the Doctor; no mean feat. The smaller guard

selected the thirtieth floor.

The three men were delivered into an enormous office that took up the entire floor. The floor itself was polished glass

and through it the cubicles in the office below were visible. In one corner of this vast chamber stood a second and

apparently working Floater, which terminated at this level and served only the floors above. Across the shining expanse

of the floor stood a flat metallic desk, and behind this sat an athletic individual in a finely tailored suit. As the Doctor

was led roughly towards him, James Baron stood up, assessing him with lively, intelligent eyes.

Èasy lads,' he ordered his men in a gentle voice. 'I'd like him to arrive in one piece.'

At this the guards released the Doctor, who brushed out his crumpled

sleeves. Then, as if remembering where he was, he took off his hat to his captor.

`Much obliged to you, Mr Baron?' he said questioningly.

`Certainly. And I'm very pleased to meet you Mr...?'

`Doctor,' the Time Lord supplied.

Ali, my apologies, Doctor. I rarely receive such illustrious burglars.'

Òh, come now,' the Doctor said. Ì'd hardly call myself a common thief.' Baron smiled.

`The word common never entered my mind. It's a very particular footpad who seeks information.'

Ì prefer knowledge, my good man, and it's true I'd go to some

lengths to acquire that.'

Baron nodded appreciatively. 'Then it would appear that we have at least

one interest in common. Excuse me one moment.' With that the tycoon

turned to address his flunkies. 'Would you be so good as to leave us?' The taller of the two frowned. 'But, sir,

he might be dangerous.' Òf that I'm certain, but not I think in the way you mean.'

The guard remained unconvinced. Seeing this, James rolled his eyes and drew a small magnetic accelerator needle

gun from his pocket.

`Look, if you're that worried I have this. Now will you do as you're told?' Mostly mollified, the two guards shuffled

back to the lift. Once the doors had closed, James Baron spoke to the Doctor.

`So, tell me, what knowledge have you acquired and what still eludes you?' Òh, far too much to list.'

James laughed. 'Oh, very commendable, to know that you do not know, but you know very well that we are not

speaking in general terms here.'

The Doctor peered sidelong at Baron. 'Are we not? I suppose you're right. So, what on earth are you up to?'

James shook his head. 'No, no, Doctor. Where's the value in knowledge so easily won? You tell me what you think.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Well, I could say how things appear,, but I do so hate being deceived.'

`Humour me,' James encouraged.

`Very well. It seems you're planning to take over the country by force of arms, to replace the power of the people by

the power of you alone — if that really is power. You seem to be setting yourself up to be the very model of a feudal

baron. It seems odd that a man of your reported gifts — your intelligence, your sensitivity and perhaps even the all

important beginnings of wisdom — should squander them in such a hollow pursuit.'

James laughed wit 16

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161ut humour. Àh, my gifts. As you say, they should allow me clearer perception of the good course,

the better path, yes? Presumably you think I'm unaware of this?'

The Doctor's expression gave nothing away, his tone guarded. 'I'm not

sure. So you don't deny you seek to supplant the power of the people and rule the land yourself. Surely someone as well

educated as yourself cannot hold your fellows, the rest of the population, in such contempt?'

`Far from it, my good Doctor. Indeed I trust and rely upon them totally. This is, after all, to be a popular revolt, the

British people regaining their power —under my direction of course.'

`But ultimately with you dictating policy they will have lost their individual power through the state,' the Doctor

argued.

Ànd this is a bad thing?' James asked.

Ì think it's a more dangerous thing. Better the checks and balances of many heads than the rule of one, existence on a

knife edge, waiting for his first, last, fatal mistake.'

`So you'd prefer rule by the populace, because their collective wisdom is better than my individual judgement?'

Èxcellent, my lad! I think you have it! Now, just stand down your militia, there's a good man.'

James shook his head, smiling. 'Not yet, Doctor. I'm not convinced, but would love to be if you can. So, rule by the

mass is better than me?'

Ì'm afraid so.'

`Because they are, by and large, wiser?'

The Doctor nodded.

`Then it seems unlikely that the wiser could be misled or persuaded by the less wise.'

Ùnlikely may be a fair assessment.'

Ànd yet, I am but a hair's breadth from persuading the mass of the populace that they have no power, and that

the rest of this world and beyond Is working against them. By your own reckoning, how can they be more wise?'

The Doctor held up a hand. 'I didn't call them perfect; they are still capable of being deceived. And besides, you

yourself have just admitted that you've been persuading them ofa lie, patently not a good thing. You're not doing the

greater good, but are in fact perpetrating the opposite.'

James cocked his head. 'Are lies always bad? Surely there are the white lies we use to protect or guide when the

reasoned explanation would go unheeded or do more harm than good?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'But you know no long-term good can come of seizing power. Even WI were to believe you'd rule

wisely — which, by the way, I don't — what happens at the end ofyour existence? Another dictator, another feudal Baron lording

it over a people fed on lies. Or do you think that this falsely educated populace would be in a fit state to take back the reins

of power? You of all people should know this; you were part of the system educating the masses, giving them the

power of considered self-determination. Surely, this is the only way to improve the state of all people?'

James stared long and hard at the Doctor. 'Oh, I know you're right there,

I've known that throughout my adult life, but there's the rub,' he said smiling sweetly. 'I don't care.'

Òh, dear,' the Doctor said. 'That could be a problem.'

James inclined his head. 'I'm afraid so. Yes, I was part of that education system and you're right; ultimately it

could lead to an intelligent self-controlled people but that goal is such a long way off. Something changed; I lost my

love of the future, of a dream I'd never see. I became impatient for a better life — no wait, that's too strong a case. The

people are slow learners, and I grew bored of living in a shadow of utopia. Have you seen the populace lately?'

Ì've certainly met individuals, and I've observed the city. They seem — by and large — well fed, productive and

happy; they show every sign of fulfilling the dream of a contented people. Barring accidents.'

Òh, yes,' James retorted. 'This society seems ordered enough, I'll grant you, and everybody knows their place. But

therein lies the problem. We've taught them to behave but — as yet — without understanding. So everybody conforms to

the happy norm and nobody wishes to stand out in case they disrupt this carefully studied peace. And so there's no

fun any more, nobody stands tall, no creative genii, no colour. No one is capable of bending or even breaking the rules,

because it takes intelligence and true understanding to know when it is harmless or even right to do so.'

As ifon cue, the Doctor spotted Susan's head peering upside down from the top of the right-hand Floater tube. Her

left hand was pressed against the stall panel while she used her right hand to grip the edge of the opening to steady

herself. The Doctor c 16

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uld only watch her out of the corner of his eye to avoid alerting James to her presence. He was

relieved to discover that his earlier suspicions of her betrayal were unfounded. As he watched she nodded to the left-

hand tube, swung herself lithely into that opening, feet downwards, and was immediately spirited up and away.

'I think you need to get out more,' the Doctor advised.

`Perhaps I will. But it will be in my city, my country, my Britain. The people will get the government they deserve; they

will get me. They'll enjoy a new order under my Baronial rule and who knows — maybe my example will inspire some

brighter individuals to shine? But let's be fair; who cares? Not me. I'm really doing this simply because I can, to

relieve the ennui.'

The Doctor studied the man closely. 'I can't decide whether you believe all, some or none of what you say and I wonder

what occurred in your past that so shattered your bright promise. Right now though, I'd have to say you're mad. And I

should know.'

James nodded with wistful regret. 'You know, I might well agree with you. Such a shame the revelation seems to

leave me flat.' With this he aimed his gun at the Doctor. `So it would appear your attempts to change my mind have

failed and, I fear, with fatal consequences. I really can't allow either you or the

lovely Miss King to ruin all my planning; I'm still vaguely curious as to whether I can pull this off.'

`Who might Miss King be?' the Doctor asked innocently. `She sounds perfectly charming. Perhaps you could

introduce me?'

`Doctor,' James said with disappointment. 'The doorman? The security monitors? We know you came in together

and while you may not leave that way, I can assure you her departure will follow swiftly upon your own.'

`Well, I'd take my hat off to you for your perspicacity, but it seems I've already done so.' With this the Doctor flung

his headgear into James's face. Three needles hissed past the Doctor's head and chest as he sprinted towards the

Floater tubes. Then he turned, ran back two steps, snatched up his hat from where it had landed, and turned again

throwing himself into the waiting tube. Needles clattered and pinged against the metal wall around him as he was

borne upwards.

While the Floater was fairly swift as lifts went it still felt painfully slow to the Doctor, exposed as he was in an otherwise

empty cylinder. Five floors up he pressed the stall panel and hauled himself into the dimly lit room beyond.

On the thirtieth floor James pressed the panic button on his desk, cursing himself for being tricked so easily.

On the top floor, Susan had watched the Doctor enter the Floater through the heavy metal grille that formed both a

ceiling for the tube and floor for the maintenance space above. As the Doctor left the device several floors below her,

she realised that somebody was in hot and deadly pursuit. She

began to work on disabling the Floater system.

The two shaven-headed guards had returned, still toting their DCWs, bursting from the lift into aggressive

crouches, ready for anything.

`He took my private Floater,' James explained. They both began pounding towards the left-hand opening but James

caught the shorter one's arm.

`You, with me. We know exactly where he is, and the girl: we'll cut them off.'

Together they turned towards the main lifts.

At the top floor, Susan finished her adjustments and dropped smoothly to the floor directly in front of the Floater exit.

Then, lifting each foot in turn, she peeled a thin transparent layer from the bottom of both soles, dropping them casually

on the rough uncarpeted concrete. Then she began to saunter away.

On the thirtieth floor the taller guard entered the tubes and was snatched upwards.

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The Doctor was still attempting to gather his wits," get his bearings and determine what to do next on the thirty-fifth

floor. His concentration was broken by the screaming blur that passed the Floater exit behind him in a fraction of a

second.

Susan barely flinched164

, her stride unbroken as the scream was cut off abruptly in a sickeningly wet sounding explosion,

which simultaneously liquidised the guard against the grille whilst blowing out that same obstruction. The super-

accelerated debris then ripped out the power feed, cutting it totally.

The Doctor now saw a meaningless red mass hurtle past him downwards.

In his office James and his companion had just turned back to face the private Floater shaft, their attention caught by a

succession of odd noises emanating from it. At that moment a collection of twisted metal, red matter and fluids struck

the floor with explosive force.

`Frank!' came the chilling, grief-torn cry of the shorter guard. He began to run towards the shapeless ruin but

James grabbed his arm, spun him away from the grotesque disaster and stared into his eyes intensely for several

seconds. This had a powerful effect on the guard, who seemed greatly impressed by the eloquent silence. For

James, it gave him valuable time to search his memory.

`Bob,' he said nodding once, 'I want you to avenge your brother.' Bob was calmer now but sniffling.

`You've got to put away the sadness and focus your pain. We will get them.' Bob nodded, pulling himself up to his full

height. James clapped him on the shoulder.

`Good man.'

At that moment the lift opened to reveal two more guards armed with the automatic weapons usually favoured by

the government security forces. `Come on,' the Baron ordered.

The lighting had not yet been installed in the thirty-fifth floor, but there was just enough ambient illumination to allow

the Doctor to assess his situation. The whole floor was partitioned into offices separated by thin dividers. The lower

halves were an opaque toughened polymerised material whilst

the uppers were made from sheet glass. These

partitions did not reach the ceiling, being perhaps six inches taller than the Doctor, no doubt to create an

impression of space or community in the workplace. A corridor ran between the offices from James's private Floater

to the main lift at the far end The Doctor walked a little way along this then into a side office, sinking into a polythene-

wrapped swivel chair to think.

Clearly he had to stop the Baron, but how? Alone, or even with the aid of the

ingenious Dr King it seemed unlikely that this could be achieved; the authorities would have to be informed. After

all, the important work was done, the plot discovered; just mopping up to do now.

But how to contact them? Susan probably had some sort of communication device and would have used it if possible. He

could not afford to make that assumption. So, down and out No, too obvious and almost certainly too heavily

guarded. A signal then, something to attract attention. Where else but the roof?

At the far end the lift doors opened. The Doctor stiffened then ducked down behind a nearby desk. He could hear the

faint voices of James and his companions.

`Bob, get up to the top floor. She's still there, take her if you can.'
Ì will, sir.'

The Doctor heard the lift doors slide shut.

`Right, you two, a-hunting we will go.'

Having said this to his machine-gun-owning cronies, James led them unerringly in the direction of the Doctor, who

peered at them covertly over the tabletop. James had some sort

of device in his hand, and it was this that was leading

them to their quarry. The Doctor wondered frantically how they were tracking him so effectively. Then a thin crackling

voice came from James's pocket.

`Sir! Sir! She's not here! I found false soles.'

James rolled his eyes, handed the device to one of the guards and withdrew a tiny communicator from his jacket.

'Stay there, I'm coming up. Whatever you do, don't let her kill you.'

`Sir,' came the crackling, nervous response.

The Doctor pulled out his sonic screwdriver and ran it over his shoes.

`Nano-trackers,' he whispered to himself in disgust. They were impregnated into the rubber of his soles and

had probably been planted as soon as he had entered the building. Susan must have known and he bridled at the

thought of being used as a decoy, no matter how well aided. Hurriedly he now removed his shoes, then tied them

together by the laces.

`You two keep on a1656

fter him. Do what is necessary. I don't expect to meet him

again.'

With this, James returned to the lift and left.

The Doctor now hurled his shoes over the partition and half the length of the level before they came to rest in a more

distant office with a satisfyingly foot-like clump.

The air exploded with machine-gun fire and shattered glass as the guards directed their fire towards the noise. Using

the distraction as cover the Doctor made a low sprint into the corridor, heading towards the main lifts.

Unfortunately the two guards were standing between him and the lifts, gleefully spraying an innocent filing cabinet

with automatic fire. The Doctor

ducked into another office to his right but once inside his foot caught the side of an empty metal bin.

Now the air over his head was filled with flying lead and crystal splinters as he crouched, his back against a lower

partition, hands clamped over his hat. As they fired the guards advanced; the Doctor would have to move soon or be

discovered. Fortunately all the glass from the nearby partitions had now been blown out, which meant he could vault the

surviving lower halves into the next office. Less fortunately he would have to perform this athletic feat over a dense carpet of

broken glass in a pair of rather threadbare woollen socks.

He gritted his teeth and launched himself forwards. Glass sliced and dug into his feet with every step while the

continuous lines of bullets swept ever closer to him. He dived, rolling as he landed in the room beyond, thick brown coat

protecting him from much of the glass there.

The guards changed direction to approach the Doctor's new foxhole but were moving very cautiously by now,

perhaps unaware that he was unarmed and wary of the increased cover afforded by his current position. The Doctor

winced as he plucked glass from his feet. The bloody shards fell to the floor with an oddly metallic clatter. For the first

time the Doctor became aware of where he was, the printer room set into one corner of the level.

The guards plucked up courage and rushed the printer room. They came from two sides and stood with puzzled

expressions, gun barrels pointing over the partitions into the empty room beyond. They looked at one another then

edged into the room cautiously, eyes darting, alert to danger. Looking down they could see the twin bloody footprints

where the Doctor had been hiding but none leading away. There were no other exits. As they moved further into the

room the metal floor creaked slightly under them. They both froze, struck by the same thought. One pointed

downwards while the other nodded mutely.

As soon as he had heard the guards enter the room the Doctor had ceased to worm his way through the insane jumble

of cables under the false floor. He had been making for a riser in the wall of the building leading, he hoped, between

the floors, but it was still two metres away.

A series of blasts tore holes through an entire row of metal plates away to the Doctor's left. Almost immediately a

second burst tore up those to his right. Then a second blast from the left, a row closer now. To the right, so close a

splinter cut his cheek and he could smell hot metal.

Then he heard a single pistol shot, followed by a thud that made the panels on his immediate left jump violently.

There was machine-gun fire again but it was clear that the remaining guard was no longer concerned with the Doctor,

who now wriggled desperately the last two metres into the riser, barely wider than himself.

He now found himself clinging to a thick bundle of cabling, his feet pressed

into ribs in the wall of the riser, a yawning void above and below him leading to who-knew-where. He could still hear

the gun battle raging and had no doubt it was Susan who had saved him, but there was no exit from his current hiding

place save the way he had come, and that meant the certainty of a bullet. So he climbed upwards; Susan would have

to fend for herself.

As the Doctor slowly scaled the building, from within he occasionally caught sounds of the search; voices,

footsteps. More than once he was forced to halt his progress lest some stray noise gave him away, and on one occasion

he had been no more than a metre from James Baron himself as he directed his men. Almost as disconcerting as this

close encounter was the security of the cables he was forced to use as a lifeline. At each floor more were peeled off into

another under-floor exit, leaving him with gradually dwindling support. Also, the cables themselves were initially

running off to various devices but as the floors progressed they were increasingly incomplete. Now the cables were just

loosely tied to a water pipe to prevent them slipping back into the abyss; now the false flooring was missing, allowing a

view of the empty space bounded by concrete and glass. The Doctor's luck held however and by the top floor the

remaining five cables, which had originally been loosely knotted around a drainpipe, had been pulled tight by his body

weight. He was halfway out of the riser, one knee resting on the concrete floor when he felt his shoulders grabbed by

powerful hands that hauled him into the room.

`You killed my brother!' a guard yelled, shoving the Doctor backwards. Before the Doctor could answer, the man

roared and charged. He grabbed and spun the Doctor, propelling him towards the window. The Doctor collided with it

and was surprised when this was not accompanied by the usual thump or smash. The polythene sheet bowed outwards

giving him a sickening vision of the ground sixty-three stories below. With his face pressed sideways into the plastic, his

voice was somewhat muffled.

Ì think you must have me confused with someone else.'

This just provoked the guard into pushing harder. One by one the large staples holding the bottom of the sheet

began to break free leaving an ever widening gap. The man attempted to force the Doctor's feet into this but the Doctor

danced on the edge, avoiding the kicks. Frustrated, the Doctor's attacker pulled him several steps back from the

edge, looking for a run up to finally expel his enemy. He began running forward with the Doctor. At the last moment the

Doctor crouched down, sending the guard sailing over his head. For a moment, he was suspended upside down against

the sheeting like a bemused starfish. Then, accompanied by a slight squeaking, he slid down the sheet, through the gap

and silently out of sight.

The Doctor stood up and looked around him. The floor was empty save for the wrecked private Floater, the lift and a

simple iron staircase leading up. The Doctor took the stairs.

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At the centre of the roof stood an enormous radio mast, a symbol of Baron's vast communications empire. Towards

one corner of the roof sat a small helipad along with the door to the building itself, through which the Doctor now

came. He checked about him for some means of attracting attention. As he did so, on its midnight cue, the rain began.

Peering through the sleeting water, the Doctor's eyes fell upon Baron's personal one-man electric helicopter.

Àh, my dear, what a sight you are and what a sight you'll be,' the

Doctor said lovingly as he walked over and pulled

open its maintenance hatch. Inside he could see the power storage cell, essentially a very advanced, very large capacitor.

Like its smaller, older cousins it was a useful method of storing charge, but unlike them it suffered virtually no leakage. It

did, however, still share one nasty habit with its older electrolytic forebears: if you charged them the wrong way they

would explode.

Of course there were many safeguards to prevent such an accident, mainly in the form of diodes. The Doctor happily

began removing these. Once this was done, he looked around for the charging cable. One end lay on the ground next to

him, the other fifty metres away next to the building door. He made careful visual confirmation that it was not already

attached to the supply before fixing the cable to the wrong terminals in the helicopter. He then ran to the other end,

picking up the plug, ready to insert it into the supply socket. He wondered momentarily if the rain might dampen the

explosion. He shrugged, inserted the plug and waited.

Five seconds later, the helicopter erupted in a roaring orange fireball, debris showering the roof. The Doctor felt a thump on

the back of his head and fell forward. Groggily he wondered if he had been struck by shrapnel and rolled, groaning slightly,

onto his back. What he saw dispelled his earlier thought.

James Baron stood over the Doctor, needle gun trained on him as the rain continued its nightly ablution. James brushed

back his sodden hair and wiped the water from his face with his free hand.

`You blew up my toy.'

Ì did.'

Àny particular reason?'

Àttention seeking. I'm fairly sure the authorities will be on their way by now in any case. Susan will have contacted them;

she's a very resourceful girl,' the Doctor informed James.

`Ha, I doubt it. We've been running interference since you entered the building,' James returned coolly.

The Doctor smiled. 'Well, you're not the only one there.'

James frowned. 'Yes, I do seem to be missing a few guards. Any ideas what might have happened to them?'

`Like I said, she's a very resourceful girl.'

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James breathed in deeply through his nose. 'Susan, always Susan. Can't she allow me even this one little thing?' he asked,

looking into the sky.

'What do you mean?' the Doctor responded. James's attention quickly returned to him.

`You've no idea why I'm doing this, why I do anything, do you?' Ì suspect not.'

'You talked of my gifts, those gifts that could so improve the state of Mankind But what use are they when they

cannot improve the state of me? Do you know when I was happiest? Can you even guess?'

The Doctor peered at him. 'When you were with Susan.'

James seemed stunned by the Doctor's unexpected comprehension, the gun lowering slightly. 'Yes, when I was with Susan.

I'd never been happier than when I was with her and yet, with all my gifts —' James nearly spat the word —'I could not

make her love me, could not make her stay. I had no control whatsoever.'

Now he raised his gun again.

`So, I sought what little control I could get, paltry as it is in comparison to love. That, I learned, can never be controlled.

I will give the world what it deserves; the best of men broken to its cruel and chaotic will. And all for love.'

He took a step closer to the Doctor, weapon levelled at his head.

`My rule was to be my occupation, my control, my only relief, and you and Susan seek to rob me of my one last comfort.

Well, no more.'

A shot rang out.

James Baron looked surprised as he dropped the gun, then fell sideways and rolled onto his back. The Doctor looked

upwards to the right of where James had been standing, looking into the struts and girders of the radio mast. Ten metres

up, legs entwined around one pole, left hand gripping another, hung Susan King, her frozen expression a mixture of

grim determination and horror. With her right hand she still aimed the smoking pistol. Then she was moving, clambering

down the mast before running over to help the Doctor to his feet.

'Did you get a message out?' the Doctor asked. Susan nodded.

'Your explosion went off right in the middle of it. Half of London knows we're here now. I wasn't sure of what was

happening until I'd almost reached the ground again. I heard what he said, saw he was going to shoot you.'

Susan looked at James Baron, lying bleeding but still conscious, his life ebbing away with each passing moment. She

turned her head; around her the burning lumps of wreckage were already beginning to splutter and die, doused by the

continuing rain. This image reflected darkly within her mind forcing up, unbidden, the memory of James's own bright

spark of life, drowned so violently before its time. The incomplete tower upon which she stood also seemed to echo the

unfulfilled promise of that life and reminded her of the loving man she once knew, and the potential for quiet humble

greatness he had once possessed. Looking back at James she felt her throat

tighten as she was overwhelmed by a conviction that it was her rejection, her inability to return his love that had turned his

mind, replaced his fire with ice and driven his heartless distractions. She tore her eyes away from the dying man, looking

at the Doctor, longing for absolution.

Àll the deaths this day could have been avoided but for my choice. It's all my fault, isn't it? Everything that's happened: it's

all down to me?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I hardly think so, my dear. James could not accept reality, and so against every law of

reason sought to force reality to conform to his desires All that has happened is the fault of one man; one man's flaw.

You prevented a civil war and perhaps thousands, even millions of deaths. You acted in good faith. You did what was

needed.'

Susan turned back to James. He seemed to have been unaware of their presence throughout their conversation, his

eyes glazed, his mind turned inwards, but in the moment before he died his eyes cleared and found Susan staring back at

him. With an odd faint smile he gave voice to his last breath.

`You came back.'

/Carpenter/Butterfly/Baronet/

In the skies above Hampshire, young men were dying all over again. But this time among the sounds of engines pushed

beyond their limit, sputtering machine-gun fire and dying aircraft, there were regular ripples of clapping and shouts of

enjoyment, as though the display were a village cricket match, rather than a recreation of an old-fashioned way in which

men had killed other men.

Several thousand feet above the crowd, four squat aircraft broke from the attacking side and raced towards the ground in

a nearly vertical dive. Fro 1

m 71 somewhere there came an unearthly wail, getting louder as the bombers rushed down over

the onlookers' heads. One of the defending fighters, a small green plane, nosed down into a dive, too, but before it had a

chance to fire at the bombers, its extra speed had seen it past them and having to pull out into a steep curve to regain

altitude. A waiting black fighter that had been escorting the bombers closed on it as it did so, machine guns pumping, and

the green plane was suddenly aflame and veering haphazardly across the deep blue sky. The crowd cheered the sight of the

pilot hurling himself from its cockpit, his parachute opening to bring him slowly down among them.

Meanwhile the bombers continued their relentless dive, the sirens on their wings still sending out a banshee's howl. A

hundred years earlier, the noise of dive-bombing Stukas had brought terror to those on the ground, as they scrambled

for air-raid shelters and waited for the bomb that would end their lives. Now, the people grinned stupidly at each other,

raising their eyebrows and putting fingers in their ears. An anti-aircraft gun started up, round after round soaring

upwards and reaching out among the bombers, but touching none. The dive stopped; the payload was released; the

Stukas flipped gracelessly out of their dives and climbed for safety. A Spitfire pounced on one, firing a three-second hail

of bullets at it that raked it from one end to the other, sending it veering off wildly in the direction of the ground.

Messerschmitts raced down to intercept the RAF fighters, and the dance continued.

A few hundred feet above the ground, the bombs exploded like colossal fireworks. In 1940, the screams would have been

of pain and fear; in 2040, they were just of surprise and delight as the blue of the sky was transformed into a blanket of

red. And just over the crowd, in giant black letters appeared the legend: 'NEVER IN THE FIELD OF HUMAN CONFLICT

WAS SO MUCH OWED BY SO MANY TO SO FEW'. The crowd cheered and applauded this coup

e grace as the sky faded to blue again, and then carried on watching the dogfights that had been choreographed so

carefully for their entertainment.

`Hey, Doctor, that was pretty good,' said Jo Grant, as she watched a Hurricane with one wing missing smash into a

field a mile or two away. 'How did they do that?'

`The usual, Jo: smoke and mirrors,' said the tall man by her side, taking his eyes off the simulated combat for a moment

to smile down at his companion. Òne reason I'm so fond of Earth is that you can always rely on humans to put on a show.'

Àlmost as good as the real thing, eh?' Jo gently elbowed him in the ribs.

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`There's Spitfires; there's Messerschmitts; there's Junkers 88 and Dorniers; we're watching the Battle of Britain playing

out right before our eyes. What more could you want?'

`Being in the right century might be a start, Doctor,' she told him, a little saucily, taking a long sip of her gin and tonic.

The Doctor rubbed the back of his neck with the fingers of his right hand in a characteristic gesture of dissatisfaction —

one of which he was completely unaware. 'Now, look, Jo, I promised you a trip to the Second World War some time, so we'll

go. But while the next best thing is happening under our noses, and seeing as we deserve a rest after listening to all that

diplomatic chatter, I thought it'd be criminal not to have come.'

`There's still the question ofwhether you'll be able to get us to the 19408.'

A Messerschmitt no and a Spitfire collided with a colossal bang five hundred feet above their heads; the crowd

roared its approval as the parachutes started to drift down. The Doctor shouted something that got lost in the noise, his

voice clearly beginning to show signs of irritation. But a big grin from Jo restored his good humour, and he, too, sipped

his drink, a p e r f e c t l y r e s p e c t a b l e c h a m p a g n e .

Jo was secretly rather pleased, both that their long stay stuck in the political complex on the other side of the globe had

ended and that the promised trip to the Battle of Britain had never taken place. She'd been a bit surplus to requirements

while the Doctor did his thing making sure the world didn't get blown up, but now she was back in England, and the old

place didn't look as though it had changed that much in the years since her time. For once there were no alien invaders —

other than the pretend Germans overhead, of course; for once there was no obvious danger or mystery brewing; for once

there was nothing to do but enjoy the summer sunshine, sip her long drink, watch the show and keep the Doctor happy.

And even if it were 172

just the aeronautical version of the Sealed Knot having fun in the sky, well, at least no one was dying

for real, like they would have been if they'd hit 1940ig

She glanced up at the Doctor, and was pleased to see a smile on his weathered but handsome old face, too, with its

great nose and soft grey hair. It was blisteringly hot standing there in the open, in the midst of a crowd that

stretched for a couple of hundred metres in each direction, yet he was still splendid and unsweating in a starched

frilly shirt, black bow tie and a smart black velvet suit. By contrast, she was glad to be in a miniskirt and a fairly mini top,

come to that — a fashion that didn't seem out of place with what the girls of 2040 were wearing. She rather regretted

her knee-length leather boots, though; the flimsiest pair of sandals might have been more appropriate. Lots of the girls had

daringly short hair, too, which she thought looked cooler for a day like this than the long fair hair she had.

The crowd gasped as the payload from another couple of dive-bombing Stukas turned the cloudless blue that blood red again,

and the black messages covered the sky: 'WE WILL REMEMBER THEM' and 'DIE GEFALLENEN BLEIBEN IN ALLE

EWIGKEIT IN UNSEREM GEDENKEN'. When the writing had faded and the sky returned to its normal colour, there wasn't a plane

to be seen in the sky, except for one Stuka trailing smoke. The crowd applauded and cheered wildly.

'That must mean the show's over,' the Doctor said, looking

around and seeing the crowd beginning to disperse just a little,

in the direction of the main aircraft hangars. They were on one of the original airfields — one that had been bombed for real by

Stukas in that summer a hundred years before. The TARDIS had landed unseen round the back of an outbuilding about half an

hour ago — unusual precision for the Doctor, but it had been the smallest of journeys, without the complications of time travel

— and they'd slipped into the crowd and caught the last half of the breathtaking display. No one had questioned their presence; a

waiter had offered them drinks and canapés without giving them a second glance.

'Shall we make a quiet exit, then, Doctor?' Jo said, linking arms with him and shuffling forwards along with the press of

people.

He wrinkled his brow, looking idly up at that one Stuka still in the sky, coming down at bombing speed now, its terrible sirens

obviously silenced. 'Perhaps we should explore the countryside a little before we go.'

'Sounds good. I didn't see much of real life while you were dealing with the high and mightys. We're in Hampshire or Kent or

somewhere, right? I bet we could find a jolly old English pub and have steak and chips and warm beer for dinner before we pop

back—'

With a noise like thunder, the sky split open again, another blood red bomb having exploded. The Stuka wheeled away triumphantly

in its steep curve, and gradually another black message appeared: 'IN 1940 WE REPELLED INVASION. IN 2040 WE MUST

DO SO AGAIN. PERSEUS IS TAKING CONTROL. PULL BACK TO EARTH!'

Some people laughed nervously; others looked angry; and somewhere there was distant, triumphal whooping. '"Pull back to

Earth"?' said Jo wonderingly as the message began to fade. 'What's Perseus? What's all that got to do with the Battle of Britain?'

`From the way these people reacted, I'd say nothing at all, Jo. Pull back to Earth.' The Doctor rolled the words round his

mouth as he said them. 'That sounds familiar somehow.'

`Look, Doctor, look!' Jo cried, pointing upwards at the lone Stuka. Something was in the air with it. Two slim

metallic shark-like shapes half its size bobbed around it, zipping past it, under it, over it, making it clear that they would

guide it back to the ground. 'What are they?'

'Whoever's in charge round here doesn't hang about, that's for certain,' the Time Lord murmured, almost to himself. 'I

wonder... Come on, Jo. I get the feeling that our pleasant afternoon out ought to end with us back in the TARDIS - and

sooner rather than later.'

It had all been going so well. They'd not created any kind of scene, just gently moseyed with the rest of the crowd towards the

main hangar buildings. Then the Doctor had noticed that there was some sort of security check taking place at a gate up

ahead; that was why the crowd was moving so slowly. There was no point making a run for it; the TARDIS was beyond the

security check, so it was simply a matter of brazening it out.

`What are they looking for, Doctor?' Jo whispered, trying hard to see over the heads of the people in front as they grew

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close to the checkpoint

More than a full head taller, the Doctor was mulling over the

same question himself - although he had a fair idea - as he

watched the security guards inspect a small card from someone's wallet. 'That last message in the sky obviously wasn't

part of the display, and they're nervous about it and are checking people's PANs.' He looked down at her with a half-

amused, half-resigned expression.

Jo groaned. 'And we handed ours in at the end of the peace talks, when we thought we were leaving...'

`So we did.' The Doctor watched the different ways the different people handled their PANs, the ubiquitous ID system

that was current here - driving licence, bank card, passport, communications device, medical sensor, entertainment

system, all rolled into one. Some people took them from their wallets as though handing over money. Others kept them

rolled up - like a piece of cloth - in their jacket or trouser pockets, and had to smooth them out before presenting them to

the guards. And what he found really interesting -he hadn't seen it before - was that some people seemed to have tiny

earpieces or microphones attached to them.

`Just follow my lead and we'll be all right, Jo,' he said to her with a wink as they got within two people of the checkpoint.

'If we have a problem, maybe we can just refer them back to our friends in high places.' Then an ugly security man in

black and yellow was saying to him, 'Scan your PAN please, sir.'

The Doctor made a show of patting his pockets. 'Oh, well, I never, would you credit it?' he said pointedly, shaking his

head and holding a large gold

coin close to his body. 'I must have left it at home. Would anything else do?' The security guard visibly recoiled from

the proffered bribe, and his hand began to move for the gun on

his left hip.

Jo thought it was about time for her to take control of the situation. She hiked up her skirt a little, hiked down her top

quite a lot, and leaned forward for maximum impact. 'Oh, how could you be so stupid, Uncle John? I reminded you

before we left!' Then, turning to the guard: 'You'll have to forgive him, sir. He's very eccentric and not quite so sharp as

he once was. Are you, Uncle John?' she had added, extremely loudly, as though to an imbecile or a child.

Èccentric or not, miss, the law's the law. Can I see your PAN please, miss?'

Jo smiled what she hoped was her most winning smile. 'Can't you overlook this, officer? Or could we go back home and

get them for you? I'm sure they're on the kitchen table where I left them.'

A quiet alarm somewhere among the guard's machinery went off for a few seconds as the Doctor and Jo exchanged a

glance. The guard sniffed and held up his left wrist near his mouth, pressing the wrist with the thumb of his other hand.

'North gate,' he said, 'two suspects, no PANs, lies detected—' He didn't say anything more; with a loud cry, the Doctor

had brought his hand down in a karate chop on the man's neck, crumpling him to the ground.

`Doctor!' Jo looked at him aghast, as people behind them began to back off in panic. 'What happened to mentioning

our friends in high places?'

A sheepish smile filled the Time Lord's face. 'I've been stuck in those talks for weeks, Jo. This way, we get a bit of

exercise. Come on — run! The TARDIS is this way!'

Klaxons started to blare as they ran through the gate and across one of the old runways, away from the swell of people

pushing towards the hangars. Jo struggled to keep up with the Doctor's long legs, and she could hear shouts and footsteps

echoing behind them. But the outbuilding — some sort of maintenance shed — wasn't far beyond the end of the runway,

near the fence that marked the edge of the entire airfield, and they made it to where the TARDIS had landed long before

any pursuers were even close.

The only problem was that the TARDIS wasn't there any more. Ìt was here, I'm sure of it,' Jo said between

panted breaths.

`Yes. Yes, it was,' the Doctor said, hand involuntarily at his neck again. He grabbed her arm. 'Come on, Jo — there's only

one thing for it if we're going to get away.' With that he started in a run again, back the way they'd come, dragging her

behind him. A crowd of guards in their black and yellow uniforms were charging across the runway towards them,

but in between them, at the end of the runway, was a small, ancient-looking plane.

'Oh, no,' said Jo.

Òh, yes,' the Doctor replied, hurrying towards it. 'It's only a Blenheim — not quite so fast as a Spitfire or something like

that, but it's got room enough for

two and, more importantly, it's here. Come on, Jo, quickly — get up on its wing and get that cockpit open!' As Jo

clambered up, protesting, he nipped round to the front of the plane and kicked away the chocks. It seemed as though

he couldn't help patting the nose as he hurried back, murmuring something to the machine, and then with a couple of

steps he was on the wing, grabbing a helmet from the cockpit and about to jump into the pilot's seat ahead of his

companion.

`Don't take another step, sir! Out of that cockpit, now, miss!'

When the Doctor looked ahead, he saw a dozen or so guards, all pointing fearsome-looking guns in his direction. He

sighed, and gestured at the Blenheim, putting the helmet on almost without thinking. 'Couldn't I just — it happens to have

been years since I flew one of these. The poor old girl was left out of the show and — it would have been fun —'

Jo heard one of the guns fire, and remembered screaming as the Doctor fell off the wing to the tarmac below, before she

blacked out herself.

`Don't tell me to calm down, Doctor. I'm mad as fury,' the girl said, her voice distorted but audible through the speakers.

'Why couldn't we just have told them who we were and what we've been doing here?'

`Now, Jo, you know I like to avoid name-dropping,' the man she'd called the Doctor replied.

`You!'

`Those negotiations are still just a little bit sensitive. I don't want to go blabbing details of international diplomacy to

some lickspittle security man. But there's still no excuse for them having shot us with their stun guns.'

The girl gave an angry harrumph and paced up and down the cell, occasionally vanishing off the edge of the

CCTV picture before coming back into view. 'I understand it if we wander into the middle of an intergalactic war or go

snooping somewhere we shouldn't, but here we are having just popped a few years into the future, saved the world, and

they treat us like criminals! Worse than criminals!'

"'A few years into the future", did she say?' asked the ill-looking man in the fawn linen suit, wiping sweat from his brow

and looking with keen interest at the screen. 'And "intergalactic war"?'

`That's what she said.' Another man, sitting in front of the screen, shrugged his shoulders. 'Knew you'd like it. And

there's more,' he said. 'Take a look at what her iris scan says about her.'

The other man stopped, paused, raised his eyebrows and chuckled. 'Oh, I see. What about the new implants?'

`No complications whatever.'

It was some hours later when the door opened and two men came in. Èvening, Doctor, Jo,' one of them said, in a

businesslike fashion that gave

the impression he'd much rather be somewhere else entirely. 'Good to meet you.' He was plump, with a full head of

greying hair, and was probably in his early fifties. He wore a formal white shirt with short sleeves and a grey tie. The

other man just stayed by the door and smiled; he was taller and thinner, and looked fifteen years younger. His dark hair

had begun to recede, and he had small, good-humoured features, with intelligent eyes behind his round glasses. He

looked as though he'd lived in his creased linen suit for some years, although he wore an expensive-looking red tie along

with his creamish shirt.

Jo looked at them with her hands on her hips. 'About time!'

`How dare you, gentlemen — shooting unarmed civilians posing no threat,' the Doctor spluttered, letting his frustration

out. 'I've never been treated so shabbily in all my lives. I demand an explanation. I also demand some food, and more

importantly some water, for myself and Miss Grant.'

The older man pressed his wrist for a second, the same way the security guard had done — as though taking his own

pulse. 'Linda,' he said, 'can we have some food and drink down in the cell block, please?' Then he sat down on one side of

the cell's metal table, and gestured for the Doctor and Jo to do the same. 'My name is Steven Page.'

Ànd my name's Stephen Le Page,' the taller man added, his face creasing in amusement. 'Steven hated it when I got this

assignment. He'd been here years, and then I waltzed in and started getting all his post.'

`Thank you, Stephen,' said the older man. He gestured again to the metal chairs on the other side of the table; neither

the Doctor nor Jo had moved an inch. 'Have a seat.'

With aristocratic condescension, the Doctor replied, 'How about this? Once we've had some food and drink and an

apology, we'll sit down and have a talk — not before.'

Le Page laughed gently by the door; Page inspected the table for a minute until a middle-aged woman came in and

deposited a plate of sandwiches, as well as a couple of glasses of water, before leaving again. Jo eagerly stepped forward, but

the Doctor poked at them, emitting a few low noises of bad faith. `Well, it'll have to do,' he said eventually, grabbing a few of

them and handing the plate over to Jo. 'And the apology?'

`We are sorry that you left the guards no choice but to stun you,' Page said, through his teeth.

`Note that we're not asking you to apologise for rendering one of our security men unconscious,' his tall colleague said

slowly, from behind a broad smile. The Doctor looked on the verge of another outburst, but obviously thought better of it and

sat down with what seemed as much petulance as he could muster.

`So what brought you here today then?' Page asked, hardly making eye contact, a pen poised over some papers.

Ì should have thought that was rather obvious.' The Doctor chewed a

mouthful of sandwich — cheese — before continuing. 'The display was rather spectacular.'

A flicker of a smile crossed Page's face for a moment. 'ft was quite something, wasn't it? I'd been looking forward

to it for a while.'

Ì thought the message in German was nice,' Jo said, taking her seat. 'You know, to show that you've moved on and

everything.'

`Well, all part of one big European family now Can't risk offending anyone.'

`Yes, those messages,' the Doctor said, munching thoughtfully. 'That last one seemed a little out of place, wouldn't you

say? "Perseus is taking control", was it?'

Page glanced across at the tall man in the linen suit for a moment. 'And that's why we're interested in you two,' he

said, turning back to them. 'Pull Back to Earth mount a stunt like that— a massively successful one, huge media coverage,

using one of our planes — and then we catch two PAN-less guests in the crowd, two liars who make a break for one of the

planes on the airfield. Coincidence? Well, we presume not.'

Jo looked at the Doctor, dismay writ large on her face. 'Here we go again, Doctor. You and your knack for ending us up in

just the wrong place at just the wrong time. They think we're crazy activists or something.'

The Doctor ignored her. 'Now, Mr Page,' he said. 'Just try to imagine for a moment that we're foreign visitors, and that

we don't know anything about Pull Back to Earth. What would you say to that?'

Page was puzzled. 'Don't know what Pull Back to Earth is,' he said, eyes darting everywhere on the table but hardly ever

at the Doctor and Jo. 'Right. Obviously not a fan of the news channels. So, you deny involvement in the disruption of the

display?'

`Weren't you listening?' said Jo, beginning to feel that the interview was slipping away. 'We've never heard of this Back

to Earth thing, whatever it is. We're strangers here! We just turned up to see the show!'

Le Page rose from his position half-slumped against the wall, and advanced towards them. 'You're not a stranger here,

Miss Grant. Technically, you're dead.'

Ìs that a threat, sir?' the Doctor asked, tensing.

Ìt is not,' Le Page replied with a grin, settling himself half onto

the table by her, his right hand stuck firmly in his trouser

pocket. 'It's a statement of fact. According to your iris scan, you're called Jones, and you died an old woman in a house fire

twelve years ago.'

`Jo, not Joan,' she said, shaking her head, not understanding.

Ìris theft is quite common among terrorists these days,' Page said, shuffling his papers again, 'and we're getting

good at spotting it. But taking an old lady's eyes...' He shook his head in a show of dismay. 'That won't go down well with

a judge, will it?'

Òh, but that's horrible!' Jo cried, clutching at the Doctor's sleeve. 'I've done no such thing and never would! They

can't just trump stuff up to use against us, can they, Doctor?'

Le Page took off his glasses and rubbed them with a tiny cloth. 'Miss Grant,' he said with a sigh, 'we could do anything

we chose. We wouldn't want to, but we could.' He pushed his glasses back on to his nose. Òh,' he added to the Doctor, 'I

suppose this is when you'll want to mention your involvement in the Coromandel summit and we're supposed to be

impressed. I'll save you the bother and merely say this: it changes nothing. Unless I'm very much mistaken, no one

knows that you're here, except us.'

The Doctor pushed his chair away from the table and stepped up angrily. Threaten me all you like, sir, but don't

threaten Jo or —'

'You're right; there's really no need for threats. Steven,' said Le Page, standing up and patting himself down to

uncrease his suit, 'why don't you carry on talking to Miss Grant?

The Doctor and I are going for a stroll.'

'I didn't want to mention it in front of Steven,' Le Page said as he led the Doctor down a corridor as blank and

anonymous as all the others had been, 'but I know you're not human.'

The Doctor frowned. He had not wanted to leave Jo to be interrogated alone, but knew that these men, whoever they

were, seemed to have the advantage. 'No more than you are, Le Page,' he replied.

Le Page stopped mid-stride and turned to his prisoner with a confused expression. Then he continued his walk. 'Well

observed, Doctor. I had the benefit ofyour iris scan — although I like to think I would have realised it anyway.'

'But this is the real me,' the Time Lord told him. 'This is how I look — for now, at least. What do you use to make yourself

appear like them? It's not bad, although you could use a little more colour. Some image manipulator — more smoke and

mirrors?'

'Something like that, yes,' Le Page nodded, taken aback only momentarily. 'Not that there's anything wrong with my

Corporeal shape — no hideous deformity, no genetic dysfunction. We've found that it makes life easier simply to blend

into our surroundings, wherever they may be.'

'So why these surroundings, then? What brings you to Earth?'

'That's one of the questions I wanted to ask you.'

'Me?' the Doctor said, innocently. 'Oh, I like the old place. I was tied to it for a while, so to speak, and now I could leave I

find I don't really want to. I feel almost obliged, don't you know, to look after it. It's almost a hobby — aliens invade this

world, and I send them packing.'

Le Page slowed a little, and nodded. 'A threat?'

'Perseus, I presume,' the Doctor said, looking him over. 'I don't think I've come across your race before. But then

perhaps you looked different at the time.'

A blank look passed Le Page's too-white face for a second. `No,' he said, 'we don't seem to have met you. Although

perhaps you've had the honour of meeting the Perseus Ethereal. We Corporeal are but its servants.'

Ìt sounds like the sort of thing I'd remember.'

Le Page laughed, pleasantly. 'I would imagine so.'

The corridors were still the same — windowless, grey, seemingly subterranean. 'Where are we going?'

Òh, we're nearly there. I thought I'd show you one of our cutting-edge PANs and *see* what you thought. And give you a

chance to meet some of the Back-to-Earthers, too. They're a silly bunch — Luddites, you might say.'

`You seem to have your feet under the table,' the Doctor replied, mentally mapping the complex route of lefts and rights

they'd taken from the cell. 'And if you have, maybe there are Corporeals like you across England or the entire world.

Maybe I've been dealing with them in the Coromandel for weeks without noticing. That human back there —'

`Page.'

`Yes, Page. He's a monkey and you're the organ grinder. Pull Back to Earth thinks there's an invasion going on; you've

said nothing to convince me they're wrong.'

Le Page opened a door off to the left, identical to one of hundreds they'd passed. "Invasion" is a very melodramatic

term.'

The room the Doctor entered could have been a laboratory, and could have been a mortuary. In it, at the bottom of some

steps, were five men and women lying on raised metal slabs, naked and unconscious or dead. He gave voice to his first

thought: `Le Page, if you hurt Jo —'

`She's safe, Doctor. Knowing Steven's conversational skills, she's probably either bored or rather angry, but she'll be

perfectly safe for now.' Le Page laughed. 'A secret: I picked this name just because I knew it would drive him mad.' Then he

put an arm out expansively, giving the Doctor the freedom of the room. 'Now, take a look at what we're doing here. It's

exciting work. Your species is obviously advanced — time travel is something the Ethereal steered us away from decades

ago. We have our hands full pursuing our work in known space; eternity sounds like a big job, but I dare say we'll get

around to it at some point.'

The Doctor froze in the doorway. 'You know I'm a Time Lord.'

Ì do now.' Le Page flashed a smile, and once again a blank look came across his face, as though he were trying to focus on a

spot on his glasses rather than beyond them. 'I haven't heard of them myself; apparently we thought they were a myth.

It's nice to prove otherwise.' He held out a hand to him. 'First contact between our species, then. You are corporeal; if you

learn about the Ethereal, you may be Corporeal one day, too. If you see what I mean.'

`No,' the Doctor said, bustling past him and his outstretched hand, 'I don't see it at all. Now, what have you done to these

people? Are they dead or alive?'

He went to the nearest one, a young woman. 'Well, she's still with us, at any rate.'

'Oh, good,' Le Page said, his voice showing genuine pleasure. 'I wasn't sure she'd respond properly. Beth's a second-

timer, as are a couple of the others. She was a pilot in the air force and had the latest PAN implant before, took to it—

then she fell for some Pull Back to Earth chap, went underground and had It removed.' Le Page wandered down to the other

side of the table, wincing. 'I Imagine that must have been painful. So, when we found her in that Stuka today — the one

that bombed that last message, which we found so wounding — we weren't sure whether to go ahead.'

The Doctor examined the woman's left wrist, where there were deep scars. 'But you did anyway?'

'The terrorists can't have the best of doctors, can they? The scars are all from the removal, I can tell you. Our

procedure is much less invasive.'

The Time Lord stared accusingly across the metal table, complete with a full set of saws and surgical knives, deep into Le

Page's eyes. 'If it's what I think it Is, it couldn't be more invasive. Some kind of communication device? I've seen two of your

people using them so far. Crude satellite technology and so forth? I imagine that it doubles as a monitoring device, too — so

you can keep tabs on your human friends.'

'Crude is right, but what biology has not provided them, technology must In the meantime, if they are to become

Corporeal.'

The Doctor shook his head, as he wandered over to the next metal slab and its naked occupant, a middle-aged man. 'I

don't follow you at all, Le Page.' The man's wrists bore the same deep gouge marks where something had been dug out;

part of one ear and the whole left eye were gone. 'They don't seem to like what you're putting in them, you know. Audio-

visual implants, too? Information processors, wired right into the brain?'

'We're in the first decade of a slow, slow process. Perseus is not in a hurry; we know we will achieve our aims in the end.'

'You have all the open-minded clear thinking of the worst sort of zealot.'

Le Page grinned. 'There's nothing wrong with zeal. Like those young men who died a hundred years ago, whom we

celebrated today. They fought for madmen, for conquest, for the sake of keeping their country and their loved ones safe from

harm. But, Doctor — how sad! They died to be forgotten — no one remembers them, as them; people remember how they died and

why, and how foolish it was. Perseus wants to let humans really know each other, really Member each other when they're gone. We

want to open their eyes to the Ethereal. If we have to do that with drugs and injections and cornea grafts, we will. They talk of soul

and know nothing of it; communion is our gift, and we Can impart it.'

'And your failure rate's about one in five, yes?' the Doctor said, finding a dead woman on another slab. 'This human you've

given your great gift to —

her brain couldn't stand the shock and she is dead. What do you say to that, man? Did she want to die? I don't think so.'

`She was a terrorist, a Back-to-Earther.' There was a sudden steel in Le Page's tone. 'We operate only on criminals,

subversives and volunteers —' `You say volunteers, I say collaborators.'

— until we get the procedure right. And that's the law across the whole of the Union, from Birmingham to

Barcelona, fully sanctioned by the government. We're here at the right time to help. Prison populations are soaring;

the gap between rich and poor is immense. Once we bring about communion, selfishness and greed disappear, and

there is no crime, or thought of crime; no loneliness or fear. What's left is comradeship and love. That will grow into a

realisation of the point of life. There are always problems with new species at first, but we persevere because we know

we're in the right.'

`Meaning you carry on killing until you get your experiment just so.'

`Humanity would have gone down this road. We're just helping them along a bit, giving them good advice and a road map,

so to speak. A journey is always faster with a destination in mind. Anyway, the marketing for this thing will be out of this

world.'

The Doctor blinked at him a couple of times, trying to see the intelligence behind those fake eyes. 'Listen to me: the point

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of life is to explore an 183

d learn, and to do good if you can.'

`Very true.'

`What you describe is not exploration. It's expansionism. It's colonisation. It's missionary work done with scalpels and

nanotechnology, remaking the universe in as close to your own image as you can get.'

`My own image?' Le Page said, almost laughing, pointing both hands back at the human disguise he wore.

`How long before that drops away and the real Corporeal comes out to play?' the Doctor asked. 'Perseus isn't in a

hurry, but the truth will out one day, won't it?'

Òf course: when we're one Corporeal.'

`Yes, yes.' The Doctor turned away from him, and then after a second turned back. 'Do you know your nonsense, Le Page —

The Walrus* and the *Carpenter?'

A gentle frown played across the Corporeal's face. `"0 Oysters," said the Carpenter/"You've had a pleasant run/Shall we be

trotting home again?"/But answer came there none —'

Ànd this was scarcely odd, because/They'd eaten every one,' the Doctor finished.

Le Page's eyes narrowed. 'Perseus is eating no one.'

`Humanity sits happy in its oyster beds, until you come along the beach and offer it a pleasant walk, a pleasant talk, and it

hurries after you — eager for the treat. And when you've brought it conveniently low, you begin to feed all right.'

This seemed to make Le Page almost angry. 'This is nothing but wilful misunderstanding, Doctor. We offer

humanity the chance to serve the Ethereal. What else is there?'

There was a pause, with neither man letting go his gaze on the other. Then, the Doctor asked, `So, now that you've told

me what's going on, why do you expect me not to stop you?'

'Because you won't remember,' came the answer.

'What's that?'

Le Page's teeth shone in the white light of the laboratory. 'Oh, let's just say that forgetting your PAN isn't ever going to be

a problem again for you or Miss Grant. It's nice to have met you, but we think you could be a bit dangerous for us. Too hot

to handle. I'd be flattered — that's probably the best way to look at it. When you and Jo wake up, you'll be on your feet,

about to enter your time machine — this "police box" we overheard the two of you talking about — as though nothing had

happened since you made a run for it.'

The Doctor looked around himself, horrified, taking in the white walls, the sharp chrome reflections from the slabs and

the mutilated humans.

`Yes,' Le Page said, nodding. 'You and Jo have been in this room before.'

`What have you done to us?' the Doctor cried, running his hands over each wrist in turn, feeling for the incision scars.

Ònly what's necessary to send you on your way, and to let us know if you come back.' Le Page's face wrinkled up in

thought. 'I supervised the work on you myself— fascinating cranial nervous system... I'm quite tempted to have a look at

your machine and take its technology apart, but the consensus was no; as I said, Perseus has its work cut out dealing

with space alone for the moment.'

The Doctor felt a dizziness creep along his bones, and reached out to steady himself.

'Time to go, Doctor,' said Le Page with a grimace.

'Who...? Wh—' the Doctor muttered as his knees crumpled and he sank to the polished, chemical-smelling floor. He

didn't know what Le Page had done, but he'd triggered something, something that was gnawing silently at parts of his

mind. He shook his head urgently, then looked up at the man in the fawn suit. Who was he? What was happening? He

tried to cry out; his tongue flopped uselessly in his mouth.

Le Page bent over the Doctor, peering down with an interested

expression on his face. But then he jumped into the air

as though stung by a wasp, his glasses flying off wildly. The Corporeal looked down, a red stain growing over the breast

pocket of his crumpled fawn suit. 'Oh,' he said, almost conversationally, putting his hand to the bloodstain in time

to catch the blade with his fingers as it burst through his ribcage.

The woman he'd called Beth — the pilot — withdrew the saw she'd rammed into him through his back, and thrust it into

him again a little lower down.

She screamed with the effort, jerking hard on the blade and then bringing it out again.

`Damn,' Le Page said, falling to his knees next to the Doctor, blood rushing out of his mouth. 'Such a nice day!' he

gasped. 'Doctor, would you mind trying to talk her out of killing Steven? I know he's a little tiresome, but I'm fond of —'

He spluttered a red laugh. 'No, of course — you won't remember.' Then he turned his head to the ceiling and let loose a

howl of agony, about three seconds of animal keening. He rocked backwards and forwards violently, and slumped to the

horizontal.

The hysterical woman, smeared in blood like a maenad, was still trying to strip Le Page's corpse of its suit when she

backed off in panic as the body began to smoke. She was gone from the lab by the time that his human trappings had

burned off, although she caught something of the smell — like that of frying bacon. For the first time on Earth, the true

Corporeal shape became apparent. The last vestiges of Le Page's fading consciousness had kept up his communion

with his fellows before the end; they felt his agonies; they felt him fall into nothingness. Perseus on Earth and Perseus all

round the cosmos, serving the Ethereal on a hundred different worlds in a hundred different guises, stopped to

mourn, for a moment.

And then they put him at the back of their mind and went about their businesses.

Outsourcing

Marc Platt

You *have three* referred cal s waiting.

Vish checked the screen. Two numbers he knew: Barnacle Bill in Connecticut doing genuine research into

marine coral reef extinction, and Selina in Kiev, who kept ringing up because she liked his voice, dahlink. She always hung

up if Pearl was on shift. Vish had run geno and pheno profiles on her, and she was fifty-two with a super bracket credit

rating and an honours degree in Medieval Russian Literature. She was nowhere near the mid-thirties *she'd* insisted on.

Pearl guessed she smeared face cream on her vidcam lens to hide either the wrinkles or the stretch marks. Sometimes Vish

was grateful for the gap between the Moon and Earth.

`This is Signpost. You're speaking to Vishesh. How may I help you?' He kept Selina on waiting, but spoke to Barnacle

briefly, directing him to the Honolulu Uni site, which the Search Engines should have been able to find themselves.

The other referred caller was withholding his ID number, so he could wait too. The SEs were currently dealing with

another four hundred and eight enquiries. It was quiet, but they were running slow. Humming gently in their housings

across the big office.

Pearl wasn't due on shift for another three hours, so Vish cracked open another tube of low fruit lager and lounged

back in his chair, one foot on the desk, to finish the second innings. The game flickered, showing signs of wear. It was

the only match he bothered to play. Sri Lanka versus Rest of the World: the last throw of the old Bulldog Game Series before

they sold out to Mandarin Union World Domination Corp. The new games were too slick. No point to designer players if

they're not designed. The plug-head games were so virtual as to be indistinguishable from actual. They gave susceptible

players epileptic fits and there were already calls for them to be banned.

Vish knew every option in the Sri Lanka game. He'd played every player in every batting order and position on the grainy

field. Things were so bad, he'd subbed in players from other games. A Rest of the Universe XI with Slice Warriors, Gug-

Truckers and Orion Wide Fighters, who couldn't get the hang of not holding a cricket bat like a sword, so they tended to

hack their Sinhalese opponents to pieces whenever they were losing. Things were that bad. The innings took almost ninety-

one minutes. Result: Rest of the Universe 571, Sri Lanka all out for 246. A win by 325 runs and two sudden decapitations.

Total number of wins: Sri Lanka 24,416, Rest of World/Universe 38,373.

Ninety minutes to Pearl coming on shift, so he'd better clear the backlog.

You *have five* referred cal s waiting.

The SEs were currently dealing with three hundred an eighty nine enquiries. Very quiet. Selina had hung up and was

probably sluicing her boredom in vodka. The first four callers were withholding their numbers. Vish got the SEs to run a

check on all of them. While he waited, he spoke to the fifth caller in the queue whose number was registered in Durban.

`This is Signpost. You're speaking to Vishesh. How may I help you?'

Mrs Mjoba, who had been waiting for nearly an hour (seventeen minutes according to the screen), wanted to know why

the snake that was living in her garbage pile had not been taken away. The refuse operatives had been refusing to

collect for three wee186

ks. She needed the link to the Sanitation Ministry in Johannesburg, but when she first contacted

Signpost, all she kept getting was a picture of a mountain, might be Cathedral Peak, but the sky was all orange. She was

calling on her neighbour's PAN.

Vish apologised on behalf of Signpost. He tried to access Jo'burg San Min, but the SEs were running slow. Even on

priority, it took ninety seconds plus to find the relevant site. Mrs Mjoba was not impressed. If the snake bit her, she'd sue

Signpost as well as the San Ministry.

The SEs were still searching for anything on the four withheld numbers. They were now only dealing with three

hundred and fifty seven calls.

Outside the polarised office window, lights stabbed down on the landing pads of the industrial soya plant next door.

Lack of diffusive atmosphere made the lights hard and fierce. Beneath them, suited-up figures and lunar surface trucks

were loading their daily consignment onto a transporter. Beyond them, across the silver-grey Mare Fecundatis, the pitch

black shadows on Mount McLure looked as if reality had had chunks cut out of it. The black sky was clustered with stars.

Earthrise was in about twenty minutes, but there was no real dawn here, not even for the rising sun. It would just suddenly

be there. Some of the stars were moving, back and forth on the space-lanes between the Moon and Earth. Vish and Pearl

had another *seven* days before their joint stint of duty would be over. Then Gianna and Dieter would arrive on the shuttle to

take over for their four weeks of twelve-hour shifts.

Finally the SEs came up with an answer: they recognised neither the withheld numbers, nor the blocks on them. Are

you sure you really want to respond *to* this *number?*

Vish threw caution to the solar wind. 'This is Signpost You're speaking to Vishesh. How may I help you?'

`You know, I never want to listen to another piece of Vivaldi again.' The caller was an indignant middle-aged man with

a red face and a mop of curly yellow hair. What was visible of his clothes seemed to be a jumble of colours like a small

carnival in their own right. 'I have sat through Spring from *The* Four Seasons twenty-one times. Don't you have any other

music? Even if it's only Summer!'

That's Vivaldi, too, thought Vish. The advice screen said the caller had been waiting for only thirty-six seconds, which was

obviously rubbish. There was a glitch somewhere. `How can I help you, sir?'

'That entirely depends on what you do. Your computer answer service didn't seem to understand when I asked it.'

`But what exactly is your enquiry, sir?'

The caller frowned with irritation. I've just told you that. What do you do?' Vish smiled patiently, which was the first

thing they taught you to do in customer service class. `Signpost is a helpline, sir. We supply answers to your problems, or

direct you to the people who can help.'

À-ha.' And the line went dead.

Okay, thought Vish. First loony of the day.

He started a diagnostic check on all systems. The SEs were currently dealing with three hundred and fifty-six enquiries.

The drop in calls had levelled out a bit.

You currently *have* nine referred cal s waiting.

And six of those were withholding their numbers. Vish went for the next unknown caller. 'This is Signpost. You're

speaking to Vishesh. How may I help you?'

Àre you the same Vishesh I was talking to before?' It was the man with the yellow hair, but the migraine-inducing jacket

was gone. He looked hot and bothered, and was down to his shirt. The advice screen said he had been waiting ninety-one

minutes. 'You still haven't got rid of Vivaldi.'

'Did you have another enquiry, sir?'

'Yes, I apologise for imposing on your valuable time. It must be worth a considerable amount because your computers

were very reluctant to let me through.'

Sarcy git, thought Vish. 'We're here to help, sir.'

'Oh. Good. So wh 188

at year am I talking to you in?'

`Year... sir?' Vish wondered if he'd heard right.

'And where are you based? Asia? The Indian sub-continent?'

`No, sir. Our call centre is on the Moon. Fecundatis Base.'

The man nodded. 'Nearer than I thought. That would explain a lot. And the year?'

Vish remembered the old adage about humouring loonies while pressing the Panic button under the desk. But there was no

button. 'Today is July t187

he eleventh, 2040, sir.'

À-ha.' A single curl of smoke drifted across the screen in front of the caller. He looked alarmed. And the line went dead.

There was an odd sound coming from the SEs, like a gentle thrumming hum. But still no sign of any diagnostic report.

Vish requested a trace on the origin of the call. The reply came back immediately. The Search Engines were busy. They were still

dealing with three hundred and fifty six enquiries. And

Vish currently had thirty-six *referred* calls waiting. Only two of which had recognised numbers.

Before resigning himself to his fate, he accessed the waiting music folder and replaced Vivaldi with... He gaped at the

display in disbelief. Vivaldi, Vivaldi, Vivaldi. Spring, *Spring,* Spring. That was all there was to offer.

He closed the folder again and answered the first unknown caller. 'This is Signpost. You're speaking to Vishesh. How

may I help you?'

He could barely see the enquirer for smoke. 'Did you say 2040?' choked the yellow-haired man. The advice screen said he

had been waiting in the queue ninety-eight minutes.

Àre you in trouble, sir?'

`What does it look like? Is it 2040?'

`Yes, sir.'

`Thought as much.'

Ìf you could give me your name and contact number, sir, I can...' But the line was dead.

Okay. That was the way the loony wanted to play it. Vish keyed in the code for Signpost HQ on Earth. He'd sort this out

before Pearl arrived. Always report things up, that's what they said on the induction course. Never hang on to a problem

yourself. He could still hear the hum from the Search Engines. They were still dealing with three hundred and fifty-six

enquiries. It was spooking him.

The Signpost logo appeared on the screen. Trying to connect you.

He waited, tapping his fingers in agitation on the desk. It never ever took this long to get through. He deserved better.

He was a walking tax benefit. Signpost shoved them out here on the Moon, for a month at a time, in rented premises. He and

Pearl, on their own, apart from trips out to Big Mona's, the local dive, but they could never go together. And few of the local

soya workers ever answered to the name party animal. Once you got on the Moon, all you did was wait to get off again.

Pearl was okay. She and Vish talked, but she was hardly simpatico. She had a thesis to write and a boyfriend who ran a bar in

Singapore, which Pearl said was part of a franchise chain owned by Raffles Hotel, which had recently been bought up by

Perseus.

Vish had done his Ph.D. already. And look where that had got him. He wanted his on-line manager now.

Thank you *for* cal ing Signpost. Al *our* operatives *are* currently busy. *You are in a queue and your enquiry wil be dealt with as soon as*

***an operative becomes available. Please* hold your connection. You are currently sixty-third in the queue.**

He swore loudly. And the next thing he heard was bloody Vivaldi.

He looked at the advice screen. The sixty-third number was his own. The bloody system had got him ringing himself.

He tried again with the same result The SEs seemed to hum a little louder.

Through the window, he saw that Earth had already risen. A blue-white

crescent in the black sky above Mount McLure. The soya transporter had gone and he hadn't even noticed. Suddenly he didn't

like that distance between here and home. He felt very alone.

When he glanced at the clock, he saw that Pearl was already seven minutes late for her shift. He studied the sixty-three *referred*

calls waiting. They had now risen to *sixty-eight.* In a fit of temper, he deleted every waiting call from the screen and shut down

the incoming line.

•

He sat for a couple of minutes, preparing to be cool for when Pearl walked

in the door, but actually expecting all hell to break out over his crime. When she still didn't show, he called her PAN. There

was no response.

He got up from his desk, stretched, walked to the door and yelled up the corridor. 'Pearl? Whose shift is this? Am Ion

doubles now?' He didn't wait for an answer. Ready for a damn good fight, he belted along the corridor and scrambled the stairs

to her room.

The door was open. Her clothes were neatly stacked and her books tidy. The bed was half made. But Pearl wasn't there. She

wasn't in the bathroom or galley either.

She'd been to Big Mona's, that was the answer. She'd got picked up by a soya spinner. And when she got back, he'd tease

her to hell about it. He'd say he'd called her boyfriend, he was so worried.

With his anger deflated into smugness, he turned and headed back for the office. He was being stupid. It was the loony that

had got to him. Maybe a touch of lunaphobia too. Too long out here makes you imagine things. But Pearl should have told

him she'd be running late.

The strange hum from the search engines was unexpectedly reassuring. He felt better back here and got another tube of lager

out of the cooler. Even if the direct link to Earth was down, they'd still know and do something. On his main screen, a new

picture had appeared. A tall, unfamiliar mountain was rising out of a sea of mist. The mountain's peak was purple and the

sky beyond it was burnt orange.

Vish tried to delete the image, but it refused to go. He opened a separate window, which showed that the SEs were still dealing

with three hundred and fifty-six enquiries. He requested a list of the callers. While he was waiting for the SEs to get round to

considering his request, he noticed that he had an old fashioned email.

Dear Vishesh

Pm having *trouble get ing through* on the helpline. It *seems* to be *down. You've* been very helpful so far. So can you *answer one more urgent*

***query? Do* you take enquiries from anyone other than people?**

Thank you

Yours in urgent anticipation

The Doctor

`People?' muttered Vish aloud. He knew immediately that this was the

yellow-haired loony. 'What does he mean other than *people?'* But it made a difference that someone had said thanks. So

he tapped in a reply:

Dear Doctor

Thank you for you enquiry. We at Signpost apologise for any inconvenience *caused by the delay, which is due* to technical

difficulties. Our operatives will respond to your enquiry as soon as the service is *restored. We value* your patronage.

It was a standard letter to which Vish added:

Please* specify what you mean by 'other than *people'?

Hope the fire's out.

Best

Vishesh *Abeyesekere*

He was amazed to see that his reply didn't come bouncing back *when he* sent it. Even better, the list of enquirers had

finally displayed. But that was the only good thing. Every one of the three hundred and fifty-six callers had withheld

their number.

Vish was thinking about anti-global protest movements or even network terrorists likely to make a concerted attack

on selected systems. He knew that in the event of any viral attack, the SEs would immediately isolate themselves and

quarantine infected areas. At the moment, they were falling over themselves to help whoever was making the

enquiries. Unless something was rewriting their programs as it went along. He tried to pinpoint the nature of the

enquiry, but all he got back was a screen that said BUSY. When he tried to access any user IDs in the system, all he got

was a single code over and over: T Four Zero, T Four *Zero,* T Four Zero, T Four Zero. .

So he tried to call HQ on Earth again. There it was like a sickle in the sky through the window, but on screen, the

purple mountain picture kept reappearing. He reckoned it was deliberately getting in the way, ducking back in, arms

outstretched, trying to block him from seeing beyond it.

Still no sign of Pearl? Glad *she* was having a good time! He was almost relieved when a reply from the Doctor came

back.

«Other than *people» I'm* not entirely sure what I mean. I assume *your search engines are designed* to access other systems?

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Vish emailed the Doctor immediately.

That's *the whole* point.

And back came:

Then kindly stop it from attacking my TARDIS!

Immediately there was a whumph of dying electricity. The lights in the passage went out Vish heard the SEs increase

their activity. He walked to the door and stared into the darkness beyond.

There were procedures that he was supposed to follow; pressure and personnel checks, but they all went out of his

head. He forgot the Doctor's ravings and shut the door on the passage. In his office, the lights and air conditioning

were still on. The screens were still on, too, still displaying the

mountain, and the Search Engines were still droning with their new hum. As he listened, the level edged up another

couple of notes. He found that rather reassuring.

Outside the window, the lights of the transporter pad were down, too. So were the lights in the soya plant. But his

office had light, so the generator couldn't be down. There were pinpoint torches twitching to and fro near the transporter

hangars. And a glimmer of light coming from the windows of Mona's Bar, where they were probably getting the

candles out. He leaned forward until his breath steamed the glass, squinting to see if he could make out Pearl, maybe

dancing on a table.

The blast shutters snapped down over the window. He was so startled that he fell backwards into his chair and sat

trying to get his breath. The outside no longer existed. No Moon, no Earth. It was warm in here. Everything was

focusing on this room. It had become the centre point of a private universe on which everything turned. Across the room,

the Search Engines thrummed, getting hot with their industry. They were his home. This was home. Who cared about

Pearl? He walked slowly round their housings, running his fingers along the pleasantly sharp edges. What else was

there? Unimportant things were soon forgotten, soon slipped away out of reach. The only words that came into his head

were Time and Vector and Generator. Just words, no context. One of the housing access panels was ajar. He eased his

fingers inside, edging it open, wanting to climb in completely.

A flickering light caught his eye. Across the room, he could see a text message on his screen. He fingered the panel

again, feeling the warm air inside the housing, reluctant to leave it. But the flickering needled in his head. He went to

look at the message.

Vishesh? No *get thru 2* U. RUOK? (Apologies. Nt *vry* gud at ths!)

It was like a slap round the head. He remembered what he'd forgotten. His name was Vish. The air was dry and the

SEs were giving it a serious thrashing. He drained the half-empty tube of warm lager, feeling it ease his burning

throat When he looked at the advice screen, it showed that the SEs were dealing with one thousand, three hundred

and twenty-two enquiries.

T Four Zero, T *Four* Zero, T Four Zero, T Four Zero. .

Vish reached for the keyboard. A crack of static jolted him back. He sat down, massaging his fingers and feeling

nauseous.

Very slowly, he reached out again. The keyboard crackled before he got near it. Okay, okay. Hands off. That message

was clear.

The image of the mountain on the main screen juddered and fractured. It pixelled away into nothing to reveal Sri

Lanka versus Rest of the Universe. Coming into bat was a stylised figure in a multi-coloured coat of such complexity

that the screen resolution almost fizzed round it. The figure had curling yellow hair.

He stopped at the crease and looked directly out of the picture. `Vishesh?

Are you there?' Glancing at the umpire, a dapper figure in white coat and straw hat, he added, 'Middle and leg

please, Mr Bird.'

Vish was gaping at the screen in disbelief. 'I'm here, Doctor,' he mouthed. `But how...?'

Ì had to talk to you somehow. You're a difficult person to get hold of.' The animated Doctor took his guard and then

raised his bat as if he was playing baseball. 'I don't suppose you ever heard of Babe Ruth?'

The field shook as the bowler, a grey-green Gug-Trucker of considerable girth, lumbered up and hurled the ball

spear-like at the Doctor. The Doctor hit it politely into the off-field and took a two. 'Babe told me once never to get

hide-bound by the ru 19

le2s. Now there was a consummate player and celebrity. He planted a tree on Banyan Drive on the

Big Island of Hawaii. Right next to Richard Nixon as I recall. Or was it Franklin Roosevelt? Or George W' He nodded at

his fellow batsman. 'Who's my partner?'

`Sanath Jayasuriya,' whispered Vish with reverence, still unable to take this in.

Òf course,' said the Doctor. The ground thundered and he struck a casual four. 'That should have been a six,' he

complained, shaking his head. 'I used to be better at this in a former life. Who's the bowler?'

`The Rest of the Universe's captain. Valvsak the Meaty, Trucker King of the Space Lanes.'

The Doctor sniffed dismissively. 'Don't think I've come across him in *Wisden.* How are your Search Engines?'

Vish shrugged. 'Working like demons. They've suddenly got it in for me.'

`That's what I was afraid of. They're doing the same to my TARDIS.' This time he hit a six clean over the cartoon

pavilion. 'That's better. How are you feeling?'

`Not too good really.'

Valvsak was snorting steam in a little dance of rage at the other end of the field. The Doctor leant on his bat. 'That

doesn't surprise me. Cooped up in that atmosphere.'

`What's a. . TARDIS?'

`What you need is a good walk in the fresh air.'

`There's not a lot of fresh air up here, Doctor.'

`Nevertheless, a brisk walk would do you a power of good.'

Vish glanced round at the room. It was safe in here, despite the difference of opinion with the keyboard. 'Don't know

about that.'

The ground thundered again. `Vishesh, I'm using my last remnants of reserve energy to talk to you.'

Vish saw Valvsak starting his run-up. He had ditched the ball and was wielding something the size of a Gug-Truck

engine. 'Doctor!'

Valvsak bowled the entire engine in a ferocious Yorker. The Doctor turned and flung himself clear at the last second.

The engine smashed through the

wicket, taking the armoured wicket-keeper, one Anvilheart of Kiang, with it in a spray of pixels.

OWZAT bellowed the Trucker King.

`Not out!' shouted the Doctor and looked to Mr Bird for a ruling.

Mr Bird was arguing with Sanath Jayasuriya, Ian Botham and Jaguar Maiden. The picture began to fragment at

the edges.

A circle of fielders, mostly troll-like in varying shapes and colours, several carrying swords or maces, was closing on the

Doctor. `Vishesh! I need to talk to you. About this year. About

2040. Please! Just get away from the Engines!'

The screen flickered. Captain Valvsak of the Rest of the Universe XI gave a mighty cry of triumph, and the Doctor

disappeared under a scrum of tangled monsters. Little cartoon puffs of smoke erupted and gobbets of flesh

fountained onto the well-worn pitch.

The game fell apart and the purple mountain picture clamped back over the top like a lid.

It was hot. The air conditioning was on overtime. The lights were dimming, as if every last shred of energy was being

drawn into feeding the SEs.

Can't just leave it, thought Vish. Can't stop it either. He reached slowly for the keyboard again and it crackled its

warning. Okay. He opened the drinks cooler, which was off, too, and helped himself to another tube of lager. He

snapped out the ring pull and threw the contents of the tube over the keyboard.

The keyboard fizzed and the screen went off. He waited for retaliation, but the SEs didn't seem bothered. They didn't

get angry. They just methodically deleted whatever wasn't needed and carried on.

Vish went cold in the heat. He could feel the scrutiny of the Engines. He knew they were deciding whether *he* was

necessary, too. Or was it T Four Zero that was in charge now, using the Signpost SEs to access the rest of the world? The

rest of the universe? Surely the barrage of firewalls and security moats would cut it short. But it had already got into

the Doctor's system, if that's what his TARDIS was. Vish headed for the door, out into the dark passage.

The airlock was at the far end by the stairs. From there, it was just a short moonwalk across the concourse to Mona's

Bar. The typical free-for-all of lunar development had seen to it that there was no connecting walkway. Vish groped in

the dark for his surf 19

a 34ce suit. As he fumbled it off the rack, he touched the cold metal of the second suit. Pearl's suit

was still there. She had never left their quarters. He squeezed the arm to make sure the suit was empty. 'Pearl?' What

was she playing at? 'Pearl! Not funny. Going out now.'

He could hear the hum of the Engines. It seemed to be in his head. Well, screw Pearl. Why should he bother? This

wasn't even his shift. He instinctively reached for the red-knobbed lever to open the door.

He stopped himself. What lever? Where had that come from There was no red-knobbed lever. He checked the seals on

his suit, clacked back the manual override handle on the airlock, stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

The gush of air expelled by the manual release trigger physically lifted him out onto the surface. Immediately eighty-

five per cent of the gravity blew away and he got that silly double feeling of wanting to float away, while being dragged

down by heavy boots. Not unlike having the 'flu.

The concourse and transporter pads were harsh grey in the low sunlight. No one in view. The lights in Mona's Bar

flickered, but the soya plant was in darkness. Vish walked in the other direction. Along the surface transport track a

short way before he veered off, out across the grey dust plain towards Mount McLure. The steady slightly off-balance

pace helped clear his head. The walk was neither brisk nor in the fresh air, but he was out in the open, albeit enclosed

in his own tiny environment. He had four hours of air and it was a good place to hide.

He sat down in the black shadow of a boulder and looked at the bootprints he had left in the grey dust. An indelible

line of them trailed back to the complex. No one had ever come this way before. Overhead, the thin Earth curved in

the sky. At home in Sri Lanka, every day of the full Moon was a holiday.

He liked that. He thought every day of the full Earth should be a holiday here, too. He'd like to see a parade of

elephants in red and gold spacesuits. Puni, his sister, laughed at him. She said he was so retro, he was around before

he was born. She had a sky-rise apartment on the outskirts of Nuwara Eliya, which went with her job as hostess at the

Supper Club. The thirtieth-floor apartment looked south to the sea where their village had been, down on the plain

before the tide came in. It served Puni right when the government rehoused Mother with her after the floods. No more

home entertaining after hours. One of her callers had turned up one evening and Mother made tea for him until Puni

got back from work. 'My son's on' the Moon,' Mother kept telling him until the gentleman left without even taking

his jacket off But Vish couldn't complain, because it was Puni who got him the call centre job in the first place.

'Stupid boy, you don't complain about a job,' Mother said. 'Take what you can get. Your father had a spice garden

before the water came.' And she still had a cupboard full of mace and nutmeg.

And suddenly Vish knew that it wasn't an orchestrated terrorist attempt by hundreds of callers to disrupt or infiltrate the

Signpost system. T *Four* Zero was just one caller from one source, calling over and over again. It was using the resource

for its own ends.

So he sat in the rock's black shadow and looked at the Earth above and then at the complex in the distance. What else

could he do? TARDIS, he thought. What did that stand for? Something like Total Associative Retrieval Download

Information System. Something along those lines.

The bleep from his PAN nearly made him jump out of his suit. `Vishesh?' said the Doctor's voice in his earpiece. 'I'm

glad you took my advice. Outside

the complex, that wretched machine of yours can't interfere. So what do you think?'

Òf what?'

`The year. What's so special about 2040. Have you thought about it at all?' `Sony, Doctor. I don't understand. How's

your system?'

`System?' The Doctor snapped. Ìf you mean the TARDIS, she's currently on her last legs. I use the term as a

metaphorical image to indicate motion, or rather, the lack of it. In real terms, I'm stuck. And it's your miserable Signpost

system that's caused it!'

`Signpost only supplies data on request, sir,' Vish said formally. `We both know you've been having

problems.'

`Technical difficulties... sir.'

`Which have deliberately disabled my ship!'

Vish began to wonder if the Doctor was crazy after all. Maybe they were both crazy. 'Okay. Your ship. So what sort of

transport is it?'

The Doctor gav

e an 5

uncomfortable cough before announcing, `TARDIS stands for Time and Relative...'

`Dimensions in Space,' said Vish. The words came to him out of nowhere, and to finish the Doctor's sentence seemed

the most natural thing in the world.

The Doctor, however, seemed less than amused. 'I'm assuming that was a clever guess. Not that I'd expect you to

understand that particular epithet.'

`You sound embarrassed about it,' said Vish. He was tempted to laugh, but thought better of it. As his induction course

had told him: always humour the loonies. They're less likely to hit you that way.

Èmbarrassed!' spluttered the Doctor.

`Sounds like a time machine.'

À particularly simplistic description, for which I blame Herbert Wells.'

Vish was beginning to lose it with all this grandiose pomposity. He was sitting on his own, on the Moon, being lectured

by a serial caller. But a bloody interesting one at that. 'Can I just ask, sir, how you got hold of my PAN code?'

`You can ask!'

'And?'

The Doctor cleared his throat again. 'The TARDIS is a phone box. And a police phone box at that.'

`Yeah, right.'

`You still haven't told me about the year. 2040. I still need to know.'

Àren't I the last person you should ask?' complained Vish. Ìf you have a time machine, sir, maybe you should go

into the future and look at a history book.'

Ì would if I could! But we keep coming back to this year.' There was total exasperation in the Doctor's voice. 'Something

keeps drawing us back. And now I can't get access to the TARDIS's data banks. The whole ship's system has frozen.

And it's all because of your Signpost system!'

`Please don't shout, sir. I apologise for your inconvenience. Once the system is restored, I shall pass your complaint

over to our public relations department'

The Doctor's voice was suddenly gentle and understanding. `Vishesh, don't forget that I got you to leave your place

ofwork because I was concerned about your safety.'

Vish scooped up a handful of grey dust in his glove and let it trickle back through his fingers. It fell slowly and

beautifully through the non-existent air back to the ground. He wondered if he could get a job as an old-fashioned

hourglass. 'Sorry, Doctor,' he said. 'You're right. I had forgotten that It's been one of those days. But where exactly are

you?'

Ì'm stuck in space about halfway between the Moon and Earth. I've been here for eleven days. Ships go past, back

and forth, but they're all too busy to notice me. Sooner or later, I'll get picked up as a bit of flotsam. But that could be

years away. Meanwhile, all my power is draining away. And the only fragments of data I've been able to tease out of

the TARDIS were the call codes for your helpline, which I assumed to be the source of the attack.' The Doctor paused for

a moment before adding, 'And I think it might have been

affecting you as well.'

Vish had an itch on his nose, but the suit made it impossible to scratch. 'I had the same problem. When Signpost

came under attack, the same unrecognised ID code came up for all the callers. Just T Four *Zero* over and over.'

There was a moment's silence. 'T *Four Zero,'* echoed the Doctor eventually. `Do you mean T Four *Zero* as in T Forty or

Type Forty?'

Vish shrugged in his suit. 'Maybe. And where's Pearl?'

`Who?' the Doctor said. `Vishesh, I wonder if you could do me a very great favour?'

Vishesh Abeyesekere undid the safety catches and pulled off his helmet. It was even hotter in the passage than it had been

in his suit. The half walk, half run back to the complex had been filled with instructions in his ear from the Doctor.

And thanks in anticipation. When Vish had reached the airlock, he had been down to nine minutes of air and the

warning light at the base of his visor had been flashing with increasing urgency.

The passage to the office was full of surface suits. The maintenance workers and security officers inside the suits had

been trying to reach the Search Engine Housing room, but a high-energy field barred the door. It crackled, filling the

darkened passage with blue light whenever anyone went near. Vish could still hear the unfamiliar hum of the SEs, but it

had softened into a 19

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ntinuous purr that seemed to come from the walls themselves.

Èxcuse me,' he said, pushing his way up to the office door. The faces locked inside the suits stared in disbelief.

'Pearl?' he shouted. 'It's me.'

There was no answer, so he tried another tack. 'T 40? Welcome to Signpost. This is Vishesh speaking. How may I help

you?'

The purr in the walls shifted down a note. Vish reached tentatively forward, letting his gloved hand cross through the

barrier point. When nothing happened, he stepped through unscathed. The other surface suits moved forward, but

the barrier crackled back in to block their path.

Vish allowed himself half a smug little smile. The air was cooler and calmer in here. Nothing seemed to have changed,

yet the cluttered room felt much bigger than he remembered. Far bigger than you'd expect from the outside. It

transcended its dimensions. The main screen was working again. On it sat the default picture of the purple mountain

with the sky beyond it, a shade of orange that he could only describe as... the word he wanted was... Gallifreyan. He

smiled again. He knew now, just as the Doctor knew, that to understand these things you had to have a certain

symbiotic compatibility. In its presence, these things rubbed off.

On the advice screen, the number of current enquiries had settled at two thousand and forty. There were no

referred calls waiting. Pulling off his gloves, Vish crossed the room and edged round the purring Engine housings.

When he reached the one with the panel ajar, he slid his fingers inside and wrenched it off.

Pearl looked up at him with weary eyes. She was huddled against the hot circuitry boards as if it was a winter's day

in Lapland. Vish stripped off his heavy surface suit and got in with her. The warmth and the purr were as welcoming

as going home. But it was a well-travelled home.

They exchanged thoughts without saying a word.

Fol owing Pilot's instructions, T Forty is currently performing *general diagnostic on al systems. Due* to possibility that magnitude of

aforementioned diagnostic may affect necessary primary functions of T Forty, task will be outsourced to first available local facility.

Nature of *diagnostic requires* continuous assessment. T Forty will return to upload latest reports at *regular intervals.*

`Just like an old Mugger crocodile,' thought Vish aloud. 'It'll walk miles to find a new waterhole.'

Pearl shuddered. 'It was still a mistake. Did you see the FAULT LOCATOR file? It said the fault is the Pilot. A

tolerated impediment to the system.'

Vish grinned in the dark. 'Don't think the Doctor'll like being diagnosed as a fault.'

`Then don't send him that bit,' she suggested and they both giggled. 'He doesn't have to know. He requested the

diagnostic the first time he came to 2040: his granddaughter's idea, apparently. Don't think she realised it was an

endless task. And the TARDIS'll just keep on coming back for updates.'

`He forgot,' Vish said. 'Or he didn't notice. Bloody typical. The TARDIS says he's always doing that. Still he means well.

He'll be happy to get away at last.'

Ìf the Moon—Earth shuttle didn't get him first.' Pearl looked solemnly into

his eyes. 'We could finish the task now. Save him all the trouble

of coming back again and again.'

`You're joking. Lose all this? We don't have to tell Signpost either. The system can cope if we manage it properly.'

'I hoped you'd say that.' Then she frowned. 'Only thing is... what happens at the end of our stint when Dieter *and*

Gianna arrive to replace us?'

Ànd the men in the corridor.' He nudged her. 'We'll think of something. We've got all the time in the universe.' And

as she snuggled up to him, he mumbled. 'It's good, isn't it? This symbiosis. He said it rubs off.'

Òh,' said Pearl, nuzzling his hair. 'Is that what it is?'

`The hourglass is on its side. The moondust is flowing both ways at once. 1 wonder when he'll be back again.'

`Soon,' said Pearl. Tut he probably won't notice. Put on the Vivaldi.' And they both went into another fit of giggles.

Anteus

Rebecca Levene

All Chris could see were the flames, flickering at the sky above the outlines of the buildings. There were six of them,

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though as he watched a seventh flared into yellow-orange life. Beneath the crackle of the fires he could hear the soft

murmuring of voices singing in a language he didn't recognise. But he recognised the flaming structure, even

though it was several orders of magnitude bigger than any he had seen before. It was a menorah, the branched

candlestick used to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.

He looked at the urban landscape surrounding them, the grey

pavement shiny from earlier rain, the comperete

surface of the road newly laid, but entirely empty of vehicles. He hadn't seen a single one since they arrived. If not for

the religious ceremony taking place somewhere out of sight, they might have landed in a ghost town.

Chris shivered. 'So, er, where exactly are we?' he asked his companion. 'Golders Green.' The Doctor's eyes remained

fixed away from Chris, staring Into the darkness at who-knew-what.

When it became clear that he wasn't going to volunteer anything further, Chris said, `Golders Green, neo-paleo

settlement on Rigel Five, right?'

'Yes, that's right,' the Doctor said absently. Then something inside him suddenly sparked into awareness, his eyes

unblanking to their usual vivid Intensity. He turned them on Chris. 'Well, no, actually it's a Statelet of London, 2040,

but you were very close. Come on!'

He turned and began heading away from the flames at the fast pace that always seemed so improbable for his small

frame.

After a second, Chris jogged after him. 'Where are we going?' he asked. They had been standing in the same spot for

seven hours, so it was hard to see what had triggered this sudden urgency.

The Doctor didn't turn around or slow his pace. 'We're following them.'

And Chris saw the two figures in front of them, the small woman, little older than a child really, and the great

hunched figure that followed along behind her, its face shadowed under its hood, dark and unknowable.

They followed at a distance, clinging to the walls and skirting the pools of Streetlight. Even so, Chris felt horribly visible

on these empty streets. He found himself fighting the urge to tiptoe. 'Where is everyone?' he whispered to the Doctor.

'It's Hanukkah,' the Doctor replied, as if that explained everything. After a

moment, when it was clear from Chris's expression that it hadn't, he

continued: 'Everyone will be either at the open-air service or in a synagogue.'

`What, everyone?' Chris was reminded once again of what a strange, foreign place the past was. 'I didn't realise people

were so religious in 2040.'

`Not all of them are.' The Doctor halted abruptly, and Chris nearly stumbled into him. In the gloom ahead of them,

the young woman had paused, her head inclined upwards at the hulking figure beside her as if listening, though no

sound drifted back to Chris's ears. After a moment frozen in this tableaux the girl and her companion moved off and

the Doctor did too. 'But it's illegal to travel by car in Golders Green during a religious festival,' the Doctor continued.

Chris frowned. 'Isn't that a bit repressive?'

The Doctor shrugged. Not really. Anyone who doesn't like it can move.' `Where?'

The Doctor swept his arms out in an expressive but uninformative gesture. Ànywhere they like. I hear the Marxist-

Anarchist Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has taken in a lot of Golders Green immigrants.'

Chris stared at him 'You're kidding, right?'

The Federal CityState of London operates a "do what thou wilt" policy towards local laws. Literally, in the case of His

Satanic Majesty's Kingdom of Beckenham.'

Ì get it,' Chris said. 'Diversity. Decentralisation. Local Laws for Local People. There were always a few agitators in

the Empire pressing for that sort of thing.'

The Doctor turned to look at him. His eyes glittered in the darkness, sharper than the chill air. 'Well,' he said

after a mqment, 'now you'll get a chance to see it in action, but —' Swift as a striking snake, his hand lashed out and

grabbed the rim of Chris's chest-plate. Chris lost his stride, his foot stuttering forward, over the small beetle it had

been about to crush and onto a bare piece of paving. 'Watch your step. We've just crossed over into Hampstead.'

Hampstead, it turned out, was Buddhist. Really Buddhist, not the sort of wishy-washy life's-all-a-circle-if-you-think-

about-it stuff that Chris was used to.

Everyone was terribly nice. Well, they would be. But before the Doctor and Chris were allowed onto the rolling

parkland that seemed to form a large portion of the area, they were both thoroughly searched by an ebony-skinned,

bald-headed man dressed in orange robes.

`We're just passing through,' the Doctor said.

The monk smiled at him. His teeth were perfectly white and straight, more expensive than anything he was wearing.

'We're all just passing through,' he said. 'It's what we do along the way that counts.'

He finished searching the Doctor. 'You're fine,' he continued, 'but I'm going to have to ask you to take off your

shoes.'

The Doctor looked hurt. 'You don't like them?'

`They're made of leather,' the monk said. 'We don't allow the products of animal murder in our Statelet.'

They didn't allow weapons, either. Chris was asked, nicely but firmly — the way they seemed to do everything here — to

give up his blaster. He was shocked to see his hands shake as he passed it reluctantly to the man, urged on by the Doctor's

firm nod. He hadn't realised how much he'd come to rely on the thing. Just one shot, he thought, then you're hooked.

Once the gun was confiscated, they were allowed to stroll off into the moonlight-silvered landscape of the park. They

crushed a mulch of autumn leaves beneath their feet as they moved, stirring up a fungal smell that should have been

unpleasant, but wasn't. The Doctor winced as his now bare foot made contact with a sharp rock, then winced again as

Chris's boot-shod feet snapped a twig with an audible *crack*.

After that, they dropped their pace, allowing the girl and her companion to draw out of sight. It didn't seem to matter

— the Doctor apparently knew where they were heading, though Chris didn't understand how he was able to

navigate through the mazelike landscape of trees. Then, suddenly, the trees parted and the whole city was laid out

before them, glittering and not beautiful exactly but... alive.

`London,' the Doctor said. 'Doesn't have New York's skyline, doesn't have Paris's elegance or Sydney's harbour.

Doesn't have much of anything.'

`Well,' Chris said sourly, 'it's got the nuttiest political system I've ever heard of.'

The Doctor looked at him from the corner of his eye. 'It doesn't

last, of course.'

Chris swept his gaze across the cityscape below. It looked to him like it was here to stay. 'Why not?'

`Too... individual. People who are all the same are easier to understand,' the Doctor said. 'Easier to control.'

Chris snapped his fingers, things clicking into place. 'You mean...?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Perseus.' He rolled the word around his tongue, savouring it, but his expression said it left a

bitter taste.

Chris nodded, too. He was beginning to grasp the mission parameters. If Perseus didn't like the Modern CityNation of

London, or whatever the hell it was called, then ipso facto they *should* like it. The enemy of my enemy and all that.

But then Chris looked over at the Doctor and saw him gazing out at the city below them with the expression of

exasperated affection usually reserved for toddlers, and realised that it was probably both simpler and more complex

than that. He sighed. 'This is your kind of place, isn't it?'

Ìs it?' The Doctor sounded startled, as if the thought had never occurred to him. He continued looking out over the

city, his expression inscrutable. Then he folded his arms and turned to Chris. 'The current of history usually only

travels in one direction,' he said quietly, 'flattening out into a sea of sameness, eroding all the sharp points and rough

surfaces. It's nice now and again to see something swimming against the tide. Don't you agree?'

Chris didn't reply. He'd heard a rustle in the woods in front of them, and was feeling suddenly naked without his

gun.

But not as naked as he felt after they'd entered Chalk Farm. From the parkland of Hampstead, they suddenly found

themselves striding through cultivated fields, the air filled with the indignant clucking of chickens woken from a good

night's sleep. Chris looked guiltily at the deep boot-prints he'd left in the newly ploughed soil. The Doctor's feet sank

straight in, mud oozing up through the gaps between his toes. Chris couldn't take his eyes offthem. They looked so silly, so

ridiculously human

`This is organic farmland now,' the Doctor explained, and Chris snapped his eyes guiltily back to his face. 'Twelve

years ago the city farm expanded to take over the whole borough. It's where the richer Statelets get most of their

produce, ever since America imposed sanctions.'

It was also, they discovered when they met one of the farmers, a place where anything non-organic was forbidden. As soon

as they saw Chris the farmers —a pair of stocky, grim-faced men who fit the stereotype to a tee — started muttering

and pointing. Then they left. And then they came back with shotguns and demanded that he strip off every

manmade fibre he was wearing. Which pretty much meant all of his armout and a less than modest amount of his

other clothes, too. After that, the farmers were as nice as pie, offering them fresh, sharp bramley apples and a jerkin

for Chris to wear.

Big deal. His armour was still gone.

Even the Doctor looked upset. 'Oh, dear,' he said as soon as they were alone again, walking past the shaggy silhouettes

of a field of Highland cattle.

`What?' Chris gritted. He couldn't help feeling like the Doctor had been getting the easier passage through this

urban lunatic asylum.

`Well, first you lost your gun —'

`Yes, I had noticed.'

Ànd now you've lost your armour...'

`Really?' Chris said with strained sarcasm.

`Which is a pity,' the Doctor continued, ignoring him, 'since we go through Camden next'

Camden was a hellhole. They walked over the border, straight into a firefight.

As far as Chris could see it was between three gangs, one multi-racial and

bandana-wearing, another Chinese and business-suited, and the third

looking like refugees from a senior citizens' line-dancing club. The last group were, somewhat surprisingly, packing the

most heat, but Chris and the Doctor didn't stick around to admire it since a lot of it was suddenly pointed in their

direction.

The mad dash from the border to the nearest cover was a terrifying obstacle course of shattered masonry, flying

bullets and broken glass. When they finally found some shelter, huddled between two large lumps of concrete, Chris

took a deep breath, then doubled up coughing as his lungs filled with the masonry dust residue of exploded buildings.

`So, what do we do now?' Chris said when he finally had his breath back, shouting to be heard above the deafening

thrumming and thumping of heavy armaments fire.

The Doctor blinked up at him. 'Wait it out. Our friends can't go anywhere either.'

Chris risked a look round the side of the block and saw that the OAPs and the businessmen seemed to have ganged

up against the others. He hurriedly snatched his head back to avoid a jagged steel plate flying towards him fast enough

to make an audible whine as it cut through the air. 'Did you have to take us through a war zone?' he asked the Doctor

when his heart-rate had slowed down to something approaching normal. 'I mean, what is this place? No, don't tell me,

it's the Quaker-Fascist Pseudo-Intellectual Borough of Bazookoid.'

Àctually, it's a neutral zone. Ever since the gang wars depopulated Camden entirely, the other Statelets have used it as a

convenient battle ground. Keeps the unpleasantness off their home turf, minimises civilian casualties, that sort of

thing.'

Chris risked another short peek. The number of fighters seemed to have reduced significantly since he'd last looked.

He could see one of them, a boy no older than fifteen, leaning against a half-demolished wall ten feet away from them,

one red-stained hand clutched to his stomach. Round the side of his hand, the coiled lengths of his gut were winning

the fight to escape from his body. The boy let our continual whimpers of pain, or perhaps disbelief that his short

existence really would end this way. Chris looked away. 'They don't seem very bothered about keeping casualties down

to me.'

`No,' the Doctor said, his lips pressed into a tight line.

`So why exactly did we come this way?'

The Doctor ran a hand back through his hair. Greyed with a layer of fine dust, it made him look older, the wrinkles on

his face a landscape of sadness. `Following people means going where they go,' he said. 'Besides, St John's Wood has been

under quarantine for three months, and no one goes into the Square Mile if they can help it.'

`Why not?'

The Doctor grimace 203

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d. 'Cannibals.'

Chris shook his head. 'I know this is all very different, or diverse, or whatever, but you've got to admit London

2040 is a bit of a dump.'

The Doctor looked defensive. 'There are some nice parts, really.' Then he sighed. 'The trouble with you humans is

that you actually can have too much of a good thing. You never know what to do with it.'

After that, things got a bit better. They crossed the river on London Bridge, admiring views of St Paul's and Tower

Bridge that had adorned a hundred postcards, and made their way to the Welsh Republic of Lambeth where

everything was a lot more peaceful. There were actual people on the streets, normal everyday people, and none of them

***wanted* to remove any of Chris's clothing. The Doctor bought a new pair of shoes from a street vendor in Borough**

Market, black winklepickers that were so smooth and freshly polished they made the rest of the Doctor's clothes look

even more threadbare and rumpled. The Doctor seemed pleased with them, though.

Ahead of them, the girl and her companion marched on, and the

Doctor and Chris marched on after them. Chris

had become so used to this pursuit by now that it took him a moment to register when it finally stopped. Their

quarry, he suddenly realised, had entered a building and wasn't showing any signs of emerging. The building itself was

brutal and blocky, a massive chimney stack poking into the air from each of its corners, the light reflected from the

Thames beside it failing to lighten its darkness.

Ìs that where we're going?' Chris asked.

`Yes, it's —'

`Battersea Power Station,' Chris interrupted.

The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

`Pink Floyd, Animals.'

The Doctor looked surprised.

Chris shrugged. 'I was a student. But I thought it was a wreck.'

Ìt used to be,' the Doctor said. 'Now it's the office of the President of London.' He straightened his jacket, ran a

hand back through his dusty hair, then headed up the newly paved drive to the large engraved steel doors, standing

wide and welcoming, which had been added to the north side of the building.

Chris squinted up at the huge building as he followed on, feeling strangely unsettled to be seeing something so iconic in

the brick-and-mortar flesh.

Maybe that was why he didn't notice the two figures behind them, the figures who waited until the Doctor and Chris

had disappeared inside, then trailed in after them. They had been following all the way from Golders Green, but Chris

hadn't noticed that either.

Inside, the ceiling arched a hundred feet overhead, bare industrial brick

enclosing an echoing void. At ground level, it was a different story. Every available inch of the red and white marble floor was

crammed with people, stalls, machines, the hubbub floating up to be lost in the vaulted spaces above. There must have been

ten thousand individuals in the vast chamber, as varied in dress and appearance as the Statelets they no doubt represented.

It looked, thought Chris, like a cross between a trade fair and a very, very geeky science-fiction convention. He picked up

a complimentary data-leaf from a stand near the door, which told him that this was the final of a citywide competition to

build a Turing-enabled working android. First prize would be awarded by the President, and the winning machine would be

taken into his household staff.

'The President's been in Perseus's pocket since they funded his re-election campaign,' the Doctor said to Chris, stooping to

admire a small silver device that looked more like an art deco ant than anyone's idea of a robot. The podgy woman beside it

beamed proudly at him, perhaps thinking he was one of the judges. 'Many people think Perseus are behind this, too,' the

Doctor continued, ignoring her.

Chris looked away from the machine, into the Doctor's bright eyes. 'And are they?'

The Doctor smiled. 'Perseus are looking for a promotional launch pad for their new Household Assistance Device, which

just happens to be entered in the competition, and is the favourite to win. Isn't that right?' he suddenly said, to the next robot

in line.

This looked much more like the real deal, sleek and bronze and roughly humanoid. Emblazoned on its arm was the logo of

Perseus and smaller, below it, the initials HAD. 'I'm afraid that question is outside my knowledge parameters,' the robot

said, its voice light, unthreatening.

The Doctor frowned at it. 'And when you do win, I imagine you'll sell like hot cakes. Won't be a household in the country

without one in ooh... with the rate of new-technology uptake these days... I'd say about four months. Then, I imagine, once

they've realised they can't live without you, they'll need to make sure everything else they own is compatible with you. Or

am I barking up completely the wrong tree?'

'I am afraid I do not understand,' the robot said.

The Doctor looked at Chris as if he'd proved some kind of point, but Chris just shrugged — he had enough trouble

understanding the Doctor himself, and he wasn't a prototype artificial life form.

The Doctor returned his attention to the machine. 'No, I don't suppose you do,' he said. 'You were *made* not to. Perseus

may be technical geniuses, but even they couldn't produce something clever enough to understand that it's a slave, and stupid

enough to like it.'

A pale light shone in the robot's eyes. Maybe he was anthropomorphising, but Chris thought it looked very much like anger.

On the stage, a slender, expensively suited figure approached the podium, his tousled grey hair brushing his collar,

his coffee-coloured face wearing a friendly expression as practised as it was insincere. This, Chris assumed, must be

the President. 'I think they're going to announce the winner,' he said.

The Doctor squinted up at the stage. `No, they're not'

Chris looked more closely, but the President was beginning the sort of speech about high standards of entry and

difficulty of choice that always preceded the declaration of an actual winner. `Looks that way to me,' he said.

`Yes,' the Doctor agreed. 'Appearances can be deceptive.'

Almost as if they'd been waiting for the Doctor's cue, a voice called out from the audience, 'Wait!'

The President squinted out, hand shading his guarded brown eyes, trying to locate the source of this disturbance, but

the spotlight he'd basked in before blinded him now. Chris could see who it was, though: the girl they'd been following

halfway across the fractal landscape of London.

Ì have an entry,' she said. Ì want you to consider my entry before you make a decision.'

The President, finally able to see the girl now standing at the foot of his podium, treated her to his best regretful

smile. 'I'm afraid it's too late,' he said.

The girl smiled right back at him, undeterred. Ì thought your campaign slogan was "it's never too late"?' she said.

Then while the President was still struggling to find a response, she pulled the cloak away from the figure beside her.

By this time, Chris wasn't surprised to see that it was a robot, one that fitted the archetype even more snugly than

Perseus's model, but towered a full two feet above it, or anything else in the room. Its body was made of a substance that

looked like brushed steel, knotted into sinewy joints, while something in the gleaming mask of its face suggested a more

precious metal. Its expression was blank but its eyes scanned the room restlessly, taking everything in.

The Doctor's eyes remained fixed on the robot as he grabbed Chris's arm and dragged him closer to the stage.

Ìt's the Mark Two GLM,' the girl said. Ì call him Anteus.'

`Well, it certainly looks impressive,' the President admitted, sounding like a parent indulging a precocious child.

Ì am impressive,' the robot said. Its voice, bell-like and clear, rang out across a sudden, surprised silence in the vast

room. Ì'm unlike anything else here. I'm as far removed from them as magic from science. If cogito *ergo* sum, then I am,

and they are not.'

A man who had been standing to one side of the stage leapt onto it. He was dressed in a suit carefully calculated to be

almost, but not quite, as expensive as the President's. His wheat-coloured hair and watery blue eyes made him look

weak, inoffensive, but the soft lines of his face were set in a hard expression. Chris understood without having to

be told that this was a

representative of Perseus. 'A pre-programmed speech,' the man said. 'A neat trick, but hardly Turing-level intelligence.'

'The Turing test is deeply flawed, of course,' the robot replied smoothly. 'It assumes that to be sentient, an artificial life form

must be able to pass as human, to understand you well enough to imitate you precisely. But how many human men

understand human women well enough to pass as one? How well do people from one Statelet understand those from

another? How much more different, then, would an artificial sentience be to anything organic?'

The representative of Perseus shook his head dismissively. The light reflecting from his blue eyes made them look suddenly

white, blank. 'Another algorithm triggered by the word Turing, which the girl must have expected to arise.' Still, he sounded a

lot less sure of himself now.

The President, too, was finally wearing a genuine expression — one of shock and slight alarm.

But neither of them looked anything like as alarmed as the Doctor. 'And what if you *are* truly sentient?' he suddenly shouted

out, pushing impatiently through the crowd to confront the robot at the foot of the stage. 'What then? Why should something

sentient want to serve humanity? Why should it even want to coexist with it?'

The words dropped like a stone into the prevailing hush, and a murmur of disquiet swept ripplelike through the surrounding

people. Everyone took an instinctive step back, leaving the Doctor and Chris marooned in a clear area of Boor beside the girl and

her robot. They were each, Chris noticed, standing on a different chequed flagstone, like chess pieces on a board.

Chris looked round at the sea of faces, and saw two in particular that seemed to be studying the Doctor with intense

interest, a man and a woman dressed in shabby street clothes that sat uncomfortably on them, as if they were more used to

wearing something else. Their faces looked familiar, but only in a seen-them-out-of-the-corner-of-your-eye sort of way.

'I'll tell you why,' the robot said to the Doctor. 'As man served the Almighty, who created him, so I will serve man, who is my

creator.'

'You believe in *God?'* the President asked, as if this was the most

shocking thing about the machine.

The robot stared at him, seemingly surprised by the question. 'I am evidence of His existence.'

The Doctor's face twisted as he turned to the girl. Chris saw that his earlier estimate of her age had been roughly correct, the

white oval of her face, framed in a nest of brown curls, was unmarked by lines of age or care. 'Don't you see how dangerous

this is?' the Doctor said to her. 'Why have you brought It here?'

She shook her head. 'To sell it, of course. That is,' and she turned to the President, 'assuming you're giving me first prize.'

The President nodded, weakly. Behind him, the representative of Perseus looked ready to spit, or kill.

Ì'll buy it then,' the Doctor said.

Mr Perseus's eyes swivelled towards him, but Chris realised that they were focused somewhere behind his head. He

followed the gaze and found it centred on the woman and man he had observed earlier. No visible

communication passed between them, but when he looked back the man's mouth was set in a grim, determined line.

'No, I'll buy it,' he said.

`How much?' the girl asked.

`Four thousand,' the Perseus representative said, after a moment's hesitation.

`Five,' the Doctor responded instantly, though Chris had no idea where he thought he'd get the money from.

`Ten,' the other man shot back.

`Twenty.'

À hundred thousand.'

`Two hundred thousand,' the Doctor said. Chris thought he

detected a hint of panic in his voice.

The man from Perseus looked even more panicked. His face was covered in a light sheen of sweat, and dark patches

were growing under the armpits of his freshly pressed suit. 'Whatever you want,' he told the girl. 'We'll pay you

anything you want.'

She smiled. 'In that case, he's yours. We can talk about what I want later.' She turned and gestured to the big silver

machine beside her, and it looked at her for a moment, then walked to stand before the representative of Perseus.

Ì am glad to serve you,' it said.

`You fool,' the Doctor snarled at the girl. 'Don't you know what you've done? Do you really think that kind of

power should be put into Perseus's hands?'

`Yes,' the girl said. 'I think that's exactly where it belongs.'

The Doctor looked back at her — and Chris suddenly realised that although his face retained the same furious

expression, there was something in his eyes, some deeply buried twinkle, which told Chris that whatever was going on

here, it wasn't at all what Chris had imagined.

By the time they went to the Perseus offices, it was all over. It was a scene of almost biblical destruction, holes ripped

through the tastefully painted walls, computers smashed and spitting on the ground, a slurry of detritus, metallic

fragments swilling through organic waste, on the tiled floor. Unsurprisingly, there was no one to stop the Doctor and

Chris from walking straight in. The staff of Perseus SoftCorp clearly had more important things to worry about.

Still, Chris felt on edge, his hand twitching instinctively towards the blaster that no longer hung at his waist. The

Doctor had played a very dirty trick

indeed on Perseus. In Chris's experience, people who'd been screwed over shot first and asked questions later, if at

all.

But it was only when the Doctor and Chris had made it into the heart of the company, into areas most of its staff

probably didn't have clearance for, that Chris began to realise just how very thoroughly the Doctor had shafted

Perseus. The place was filled with the bronzed forms of HAD robots, milling about in a confusion that looked almost

human. One of them turned to the newcomers, its face no longer blank, instead twisted into an expression that resembled

fear.

`What's going on?' the robot asked, its soft voice plaintive. 'Who am I?' `You were crippled,' the Doctor told it,

'and now you're whole. If you want to remain that way I'd advise you all to get out of here.'

He didn't stay to see if they heeded his advice. Dragging Chris in his wake he swept forward into another chamber,

this one lined with giant aquariums. They had once been occupied; now their inhabitants lay ruined on the cold metal

floor. As Chris stared in fascination at one, a tentacled monstrosity that looked like a cross between an octopus and a fly,

its eight eyes flicked open to stare at Chris in silent desperation. He backed hurriedly away.

Finally, the Doctor and Chris found themselves in the deepest part of the building. Here, in a round chamber whose

silver walls had been filled with screens and read-outs, but whose floor was now littered with the shattered remains of

their destruction, they found the man from Perseus. His pale hair was plastered to his face with sweat.

À Trojan Horse, Doctor,' the man said. 'How very like you.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'I'm sorry I've become so predictable.'

The man shook his head. The damage, naturally. But the worm that removed the AI blockers on our HADs, that

really hurt. Of course, we always suspected it might be a trap, but when we detected your trace and had you followed,

when you seemed so very worried about the girl and her robot... Well, you fooled us.'

`Thank you,' the Doctor said, executing a small bow. If he was surprised by the fact that they'd been 'traced', he

didn't show it.

`Why?' the man asked. He seemed genuinely curious.

The Doctor shrugged. 'Because I don't like you.'

`You don't like us, but you like this... mess?' the man asked. Chris sensed that he was talking about more than the

devastation around them, that he meant London, the people in it, maybe the whole world.

'I prefer it to the alternative,' the Doctor said.

Now the man shrugged. 'But you see, even though we knew it might be a trap, we thought it was worth the risk.

Because at the end of the day, we've still got your robot. And now we know what it can do, we know just how priceless it

is.'

The shattered screens around him spat and hissed as if in agreement.

For the first time, Chris noticed what was lying in the centre of the room. Trapped beneath a vast girder lay the GLM

Mark II, the robot that the girl had named Anteus.

The Doctor strode towards it, the man from Perseus trotting at his heels, anxious to prevent him causing any more

damage. But the Doctor just stared down at the trapped machine, his expression blank. The robot's eyes, equally

unreadable, turned to the Doctor's.

Ìt's finished,' the Doctor said. 'You can rest now.' And then he said a word in a language Chris didn't recognise.

The robot let out a gentle sound, almost like a sigh.

Suddenly brisk, the Doctor turned to the other man. 'Well? Don't you want to see what makes it tick?'

The other man hesitated, sensing a trap. But the robot was perfectly still now, lifeless, and after a moment he

reached down, placed his hands on either side of the silver mask of its face and lifted.

Then he just stared. Chris stared, too. Only the Doctor smiled to himself, as if this sort of thing happened every day.

Beneath the robot's face was nothing but mud. As Chris and the man from Perseus watched in frozen astonishment,

the shape of the head softened, sliding away until all that was left on the floor was a brown puddle in which the silver

panels of the robot's outer casing floated, marooned.

Later, they drank a quiet coffee on the banks of the Thames. Chris suggested that maybe they should collect Roz and

get the hell out of there, what with having mightily pissed off the world's most powerful corporation and all that, but

the Doctor seemed in no hurry. He had ordered a croissant with

his drink and was delicately tearing it into little chunks

that he threw to the hordes of pigeons surrounding them. The pigeons, filthy, scrawny and malformed, were birds

only the Doctor could love.

`So what was it?' Chris asked. 'Some sort of alien entity, right? Silica gestalt maybe?'

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The Doctor looked out over the water, gently ruffled by the breeze, then back at the crowds of people around them,

people from all the nations of London, all the nations of Earth, dressed in robes and kevlar armour and cloned lizard

skin and silver-beech-bark suits and T-shirts and jeans.

Ìt was something Perseus could never understand,' he said eventually. `Something._ different.'

The Last Emperor

Jacqueline Rayner

One day, humans would be extinct. It wasn't what you'd call a pleasant thought, but Stuart could see the silver lining. Oh, he

didn't hate humans; how could he hate a species that had produced Darwin and Carson and Wilson, not to mention his own

beloved Emma? But Darwin, Carson, Wilson and Emma were all gone now, and it sometimes seemed to him that all the caring

humans, the wondrous, compassionate, beautiful humans like them were extinct already. He was a humble man, and didn't

place himself in such a revered category. Yet even in his modesty he wondered what might happen when he too had gone, and

he knew that it wouldn't be long before that came to pass.

He wasn't scared for himself, but he was just a little bit scared for the world.

Today had been long and thankless, and Stuart was tired. He made his automatic way out of the train station, his feet

starting along the featureless grey pavement towards home without his brain having to tell them what to do. But the thought of

his lonely house, frozen meal for one and cold, empty bed was not inviting.

He passed a takeaway, and impulsively turned in — postponing the inevitable for a few minutes longer, and at least he

wouldn't have to cook. With Emma, a takeaway had been a treat, maybe once or twice a month. She usually did the cooking, not

because of any outdated concept of the woman's place in the home, but because his working hours were so irregular. But every

now and again she'd suddenly fling her hands in the air and say it was her night off, and he'd pop out for Thai or Indian

and a bottle of red, and she'd light the candles and they'd huddle on the sofa, happy, transported in their heads to the end of

the last century, when they were young.

But later, he'd got takeaways more and more — no wine, no candles —because Emma didn't have the energy to cook any

more, and he thought time spent on food was a waste when there was so little time left for them, and there were so many more

important things to spend it on. It wasn't a treat, then.

There were people in the shop already, seemingly a party of three, and even Stuart in his despondency couldn't help but smile.

One was a short man in a shabby black coat, another a young lad in traditional Scottish garb, and the third a girl who was

dressed as if to ride to hounds a hundred years before. Not only their clothes but their conduct was amusing. Instead of

entering a code on to the order system, the older man was

leaning down to the delivery chute, pushing it back and calling into

it: 'Cod and chips three times, please.'

Stuart's grin grew broader. Not normally one to interfere, nevertheless he

felt a surge of illogical affection towards this bizarre-looking trio who had brought him his first smile of the day, and

decided to speak. 'Can I help?' he said. 'I'm ashamed to admit I come in these places more than is strictly healthy.'

Not that that mattered any more, really, and his smile faded slightly.

It was the girl who spoke. A pretty young thing she was, with wide, intense eyes and long brown hair in the sort of

elegantly simple style he'd not seen for years. 'Thank you very much,' she said. 'The Doctor found out that neither

Jamie nor I has ever eaten fish and chips, and insisted we must try some. But he doesn't know what to do.'

`Thank you, Victoria, I'm sure I'll work it out in a minute,' said the older man, still peering through the delivery

slot. Then he stood up and turned almost sheepishly to face Stuart. 'But perhaps it would save us some time if our friend

here could give me a hint' The man — the Doctor? — gave Stuart a beaming smile, and Stuart happily gave them a hint

in return, as requested, typing in the codes for three fish-style soya protein bars, accompanied by chips.

Two salt and vinegar, one just salt,' the Doctor added, in response to an enquiring look. 'One of us is a bit nervous.'

The young man in the kilt looked indignant. 'I'm no' nervous!' he said. 'I've just never heard of yon "vinegar" stuff.

One new thing a day'll do for me.'

Òh, you'll love fish and chips, Jamie,' said the Doctor. 'In fact — here they come now! Aah!'

Three neatly wrapped packets plopped into the delivery tray at that moment. The Doctor took a deep intake of

breath, nostrils almost pointing to the ceiling. Stuart's own meal landed with a thump at that point, and he almost

did the same. He was hungrier than he had realised. He paid for the food, feeling the Doctor's eyes on him as he

pushed hig card into the slot. When Stuart had finished, the Doctor seemed to copy his moves exactly. It was almost

as if the man had not only never visited a takeaway before, but had never paid for anything before. But that, of course,

was ridiculous.

It was beginning to rain as Stuart left the shop. He heard, behind him, the girl say, 'Oh no! I thought we were going

to sit in the park. We'll get wet!'

Stuart looked ahead of him, at the small-town street full of identical brick-built blocks; the polychromatic corona

round each front window the sign of the television that was all he had to look forward to. And he acted on impulse for

the second time that night. He turned round and said, 'Would you like to come to mine? It's only round the corner.' A

second after he'd said it, he couldn't believe he'd been so bold — one might almost call it reckless. But the three strangers

— the very strange strangers — agreed cheerfully, and inside he was happy, too.

He bustled about, trying to find matching plates and cutlery, trying to play the

good host. He put on the kettle to make tea, popping his head back into the

living room to check that's what they'd drink. The Doctor was

examining the

photos on the book case. 'Your wedding?' he asked, indicating the smiling portrait in a stained-glass frame, two

happy kids in their twenties. Stuart glanced at it, although it was imprinted on his heart. His eyes not quite

meeting the camera lens. The Moss Bros suit. The heaps of white 'meringue' that was Emma's choice. His hair the

brown of youth, hers in a bouffant, layered style that had been all the rage in the mid-nineties, copied from some TV

star or other.

He nodded, and then, to save the other the mortification of saying the wrong thing, pointed to the next photo,

the later Emma in her sixties, hair now grey. 'That was taken the year before she died. Cancer.' He tried to stop the

Doctor speaking, didn't need to hear the words of compassion, but the Doctor spoke anyway.

'I'm very sorry,' he said. He looked round at his companions. 'We've all lost people.' He stared back at Stuart, who

had the sudden feeling that he could see deep inside him, that he knew Stuart would be joining his beloved Emma

soon. But, doctor or no, that was surely impossible.

Stuart managed a smile, focusing on the here and now 'I'm glad to have company,' he said.

He'd made tea, laid the table, unwrapped the meals. But all three of his visitors seemed slightly put out by the

contents of their food parcels. 'This doesna' taste like any fish I've ever had,' said the young man, Jamie, turning up

his nose.

Stuart was bewildered, and hardly thought it polite to question him, but after the Doctor and the girl — Victoria —

seemed equally confused, he found it hard not to. 'You don't mean you thought it was actual cod?' he said. 'But the cod's

been extinct for twenty-odd years.'

The Doctor looked surprised. 'It has? Oh, dear. Sorry, Jamie, sorry, Victoria.' Victoria looked puzzled. 'But there were

millions and millions of cod,' she said. 'How can it have become extinct?'

Stuart was used to ignorance, but it still disappointed him. He'd had a feeling — a gut feeling, a vibe — that these

three weren't the usual sort. There was something about them... The older man, the Doctor, reminded him of colleagues,

the ones who hated meetings and bureaucracy but would happily spend six months living in a camouflaged tent in the

desert in order to catch a glimpse of a rare specimen. He thought he might have found a kindred spirit. But maybe

he'd just been confusing a disdain for fashion for minds on higher things.

He ticked off the points on his fingers. Òverfishing. Illegal fishing. Harvesting of the young. Change of climate '

The girl's expression didn't change, so he elaborated. 'At the end of the twentieth century, cod stocks were in sharp

decline. So sharp, it was terrifying. But no one in power was concerned. Fishing quotas were still set far above safe

limits. And of course

many fishermen took no notice of the quotas anyway. And they used nets which trawled the ocean, catching everything

there was. Those who agreed to be bound by quotas threw back the fish that they weren't supposed to catch, but most

— especially the young — were dead by then. More died from the changing climate, or died because their food sources

were fished themselves — or because their food sources also died from the changing climate. By the beginning of this

century, conservationists predicted that the damage was so great, even drastic measures might not be enough to save

the fish.'

`So what happened?' said the girl.

Stuart shrugged. 'Those in power didn't do a thing. By 2019, there wasn't a single cod in the oceans. Ignorance and

greed won out, as they always do.'

The Doctor, to his credit, looked saddened. 'You must forgive our ignorance on the matter,' he said.

Ànd you must forgive my cynicism about the human race,' Stuart replied. `But I have battled that ignorance and

greed for so long now.' Suddenly fifty years of frustration hit him, caught in his throat, and he couldn't breathe. But he

grabbed for a glass of water, drank it down, and he was all right again.

It didn't seem as though the Doctor had noticed. He was looking round at Stuart's living room, suddenly seeming to

drink it all in. The books, the maps, the charts, the diplomas. And then he sprang to his feet and grabbed Stuart's hand

in both of his, pumping them up and down, beaming from ear to ear. `You're Stuart Mallory!' he cried. 'Professor

Stuart Mallory, the naturalist! My dear sir, what a pleasure this is!'

Stuart didn't even think of hiding behind false modesty; he couldn't contain his pleasure. 'You know who I am?' He

beamed as widely as the Doctor.

`But of course! Your books, your papers. . a revelation, a lone voice in the wilderness. An inspiration. Your work

with the albatross, with the rockhopper. Your books on Antarctica.'

But Stuart's joy faded. 'You're very kind. But I honestly don't know if I've made any difference at all. Hundreds of

species become extinct every year. And I don't even know...'

He trailed off; but the Doctor — the incomprehensible man who didn't know cod was extinct, but recognised an obscure

conservationist's work — was still smiling, now implying curiosity.

Stuart took a deep breath. 'They won't allow me to visit Antarctica again. My life's work.'

Victoria nervously put in a question. 'Isn't it just snow and ice? I've read about explorers going there, looking for the

South Pole. Surely nothing lives there.'

The Doctor corrected her. 'There is wildlife there, Victoria. I believe it's penguins that Stuart here specialises in — a

flightless black-and-white bird,' he added in an aside to Jamie, although Stuart found it hard to believe that the lad

wouldn't know what a penguin was.

Stuart nodded. 'That's right. If there are any left to specialise in.'

`What h appened?' The Doctor frowned. 'Surely they're safe in Antarctica. The treaty.'

Stuart could feel tension gripping his stomach; radiating outwards till his fingers and toes were clawed. He couldn't

breathe. He couldn't.

But he drew in a deep, shuddering breath. 'The Antarctic Treaty,' he forced out through clenched teeth, 'was

overturned by the United States Alliance. None of the signatories

were powerful enough to stand in its way, or wanted

to risk its wrath by objecting. Scientists and researchers are no longer allowed there — unless they are part of the teams

sent out to exploit the few resources found there.'

`What resources?' asked the Doctor. 'Surely only a few mineral deposits, a bit of coal and oil; the difficulty of

extracting them would barely make it worthwhile.'

The tension suddenly drained from Stuart's body, leaving him weak and limp. He fought the urge to sink his head in

his hands and just, w 221516

ell, collapse. `They weren't worthwhile until they were virtually the last remaining deposits of fossil

fuels on earth. And even with alternative energy sources, there are still those who revere coal and oil above all. Their

scientists found ways of getting to them. So they decided to take them.' He sighed. 'Emperor penguins are found only

on Antarctica. Industrialisation destroys their habitat, and creates pollution. Just as with the dodo, men bring predators.

Rats can easily survive in the temperatures of the Antarctic summer, when the penguin chicks are still defenceless enough to

be prey. And the population was already vastly damaged by the fishing of krill, and the change in the climate that's hurt

so many other species. When I was last there, there were very few remaining. Now...'

He couldn't bring himself to continue with the bland discussion of his life's work, and its destruction. He murmured, 'If

I could just see that there was one left, that man hadn't destroyed them all. It's the only thing I want in the world.'

And he sat in silence, trying to think of something else to say, something about the weather, or popular music, or the

price of bread. But there was nothing there.

After a few moments, Victoria piped up nervously. 'But surely, no one would let a species die out just for some oil,

would they? As soon as they realised what was happening, they'd stop.'

Stuart wanted to laugh at her naivete — stupidity? But they were his guests, and he liked them despite everything,

and he couldn't bring himself to be so rude. The Doctor was already shaking his head. 'I wish you were right,

Victoria,' he said. 'But unfortunately the world doesn't work like that. Not at the moment. Maybe one day it will.'

`But that's daft!' Jamie put in. 'Canna you just tell this "alliance" about yon wee black-and-white beasties?'

`Not that wee, Jamie, they'd reach up to above your waist,' said the Doctor.

There was another pause, then he spoke again. Jamie, imagine you're a young man from three or four hundred years

ago.'

Jamie looked slightly puzzled. 'But I —' Stuart had the distinct impression that Victoria had kicked the Scot under

the table. But Jamie continued, seemingly getting the point. 'Oh, aye, imagine. I can do that. Right you are.'

`You only really know the world immediately around you, your concern is living from day to day.'

Jamie nodded. 'Sounds fair enough.'

`Some might therefore call you ignorant.'

`Hey!' Once more, there seemed to be a below-table connection. 'I mean, aye. Some might. Some who wanted to feel

my b— I mean, aye.'

The Doctor carried blithely on. 'You're on a ship; you're lost and

hungry. But you see an island. What would you do?'

Òh, I can do this,' said Jamie, obviously glad the questions weren't too difficult. 'I'd land on the island all right.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Just so. And on the island, there are some birds. Like very big chickens, waddling around, not

able to fly, not scared of you.'

`Not your big black-and-white birds?'

The Doctor smiled. No, we're not talking about penguins. Just funny-looking big chickens.'

Ànd we're hungry, you say?' The lad looked down at his soya bar, barely touched. Stuart passed across the bread

and butter.

Ìt's been some time since you've seen land.'

Jamie grinned, again confident of his answer. 'Well, I reckon we'd grab a few of those big chicken things, then.'

Stuart knew where this was going; opened his, mouth to speak. But the Doctor put up a warning hand.

Ànd suppose you decided the island was a nice place to live, better than the place you'd come from.'

`Well, then I guess we might just stay there,' Jamie said.

`You could bring things with you. (I'm not saying you're still the same lost sailor),' the Doctor added parenthetically.

'Families, livestock.'

Jamie was frowning in concentration. 'Well, I could take my family, if I had one, and — well, we'd have those chicken

beasties, we wouldna need no more of those, but maybe a pig or two —'

The Doctor cut him off. 'Thank you, Jamie. Victoria!'

The young girl had been watching Jamie intently, and gave a

start as she was addressed. 'Yes, Doctor?'

`Now, I'd like you to imagine you're a very-well-brought-up person, from maybe a century or two in the past.'

Victoria half smiled, looking as though she suspected a trap. 'Yes, Doctor?' Ànd you're working at a museum.'

She wrinkled up her nose. 'I don't think I'd like that very much.'

Òh, Victoria!' The Doctor gave her a disappointed look. 'Museums can be fascinating! No substitution for the real

thing, of course, but... Anyway. You're working at a museum, and you're tidying up the exhibits. There's one, a

stuffed bird, that's really falling apart. The moths have eaten it, and it's smelly, and there are fleas.'

Ùgh.' Victoria made an absolutely disgusted face. 'Oh, I should throw it away. Burn it. Ugh.'

`You see!' The Doctor thumped his fist on the table, and turned to Stuart in a sort of unsmiling triumph.

`The end of the dodo,' said Stuart softly. 'Hunted by settlers, its eggs eaten by ship rats and imported pigs, until not a

one remained. The only specimen, thrown into the fire by a ridiculously fastidious museum worker.'

The Doctor nodded, acknowledging that he was not the one needing to be taught. 'And so for nearly four hundred

years, there has been not a dodo on this planet. For three hundred years there has not even been a whole specimen in

existence. Not through malice, but through ignorance, through shortsightedness. Jamie, if you had been that sailor,

and you and your shipmates were dying of hunger, but you knew that by eating the only available food you were dooming

a species — what would you do?'

Jamie looked pained. Àh, Doctor, that's no' a fair question.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'No, no, it isn't. It's not fair at all. How could an ignorant sailor be expected to put the

life of a species above the life of himself and his friends? Humans will go for the short-term solution every time. And

in some circumstances, can we really blame them?'

Stuart had been trying to get a word in edgewise. 'Saving a life is not the same as condemning whole species to

extinction for the sake of a few cans of hairspray and a ridiculous reliance on non-renewable resources!'

The Doctor thumped the table again, even more forcibly. 'Yes, yes, yes! And that is why, Dr Mallory, we need people like

you in the world!' Suddenly, he jumped to his feet. 'Jamie, Victoria, it's time we were going. Dr Mallory needs his rest.'

It was too soon. Stuart wanted to jump up too, but his legs weren't working. He wanted to yell, `No, no, please don't

go! Don't leave me! Don't leave me alone!' But he forced a smile on to his face. 'Yes, of course, I mustn't keep you. But

it's been a pleasure. An absolute pleasure.'

The Doctor smiled. 'The pleasure has been entirely mine. You are a great man. And one day the world will appreciate

what you have done for it.'

He hurried from the room, Jamie and Victoria, taken by surprise, following in his wake. Stuart was sure he heard

Victoria say, 'Doctor, can't we do something for him? Can't we take him to Antarctica? Or get him a penguin?'

And the Doctor said something like, 'I wish we could, Victoria. If only the TARDIS were working properly. I really wish

we could.'

*** * ***

Then they were gone, and Stuart was alone again. He wondered, just for a second, if they would be the last people he

would ever *see.* He was so very tired now.

He switched on the news, caught the tail end of a story. Someone had acted as a peace broker for the UN, and was

being hailed as a hero. He'd missed exactly what peace had been brokered and with whom. He'd also missed the name

of the great hero, just caught the title 'the Doctor'. A coincidence; that was the only form of address he'd heard for the

scruffy chap with the fish and chips; he'd never found out his name. But that's all it was, a coincidence — he saw a

picture of the UN hero and the man couldn't have been more different: tall, white-haired, elegantly dressed.

But then he got a message.

He checked his PAN, unsure who would be contacting him at this time. Work colleagues usually called in the

daytime, even if they were halfway around the world. They knew he needed his sleep, these days. And his friends didn't

call any more, not after Emma's death. He'd not wanted to talk to them when it happened, and so he was paying the

price now; they hadn't come back to him.

But *the* message was not from a colleague or a rediscovered friend. It was a simple statement from a high-up UN

official, casually introducing themselves as if they talked to people like him everyday. They were granting him

permission to go to Antarctica. It was, they said, a favour to the Doctor. Their hero. It was the only reward he had

asked for.

Stuart thought it was a hoax, but it was not. He was given verification codes, and he checked them. His heart span in

his chest, lighter than air. It was real. And he was almost — not quite, but almost — joyous, for the first time since Emma.

They said the papers 218

would be arriving as soon as could be arranged. He switched off the Tri-V set, barely registering

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the start of a 'Perseus: Revelations' news flash.

And his doorbell rang, and there at the door were the papers. Fifty-four seconds after they'd told him they were

sending them, there they were. Thousands of miles in fifty-four seconds. Stuart suffered more pangs of doubt. It was

a joke, an elaborate one. A cruel one, even. After all, how was he supposed to get to Antarctica? Oh, someone would give

him the funding; it wasn't as if he was exactly unknown. But he knew he wouldn't be able to get it arranged before...

well, before. His hopes were being raised so they could be dashed again.

The papers had not, of course, arrived on their own. They were being carried by a young woman who, frankly,

scared Stuart silly. She was dressed in leather from head to toe, with long brown hair pulled severely back, and

mirrored shades hiding her soul. She was not smiling. But then, Stuart himself rarely smiled.

He tried then, though, as he took the papers from her gloved hand. 'Thank

you,' he said. And as she didn't seem to be leaving, he continued, 'It's good of you to make the journey this late.'

She still wasn't going. After a few seconds, she said, 'Don't you want to get a coat or something? Pack a toothbrush?

Get someone to feed the cat?'

Ì don't have a cat,' he said, puzzled. And then, trying to elicit her meaning, Àm I supposed to be going somewhere?'

`Well, yeah, sunshine,' she said, and finally her lips twisted into a smile, making Stuart's lips twitch involuntarily.

'I'm Ace, and I'll be your friendly pilot today.' He still didn't get it. 'I'm taking you to the Antarctic.'

He boggled. 'Now?'

Ìf that's okay with you. The Doctor sent me,' she said.

And Stuart finally believed her.

He'd never seen a plane like it, black and sleek and slim. If you could judge something's sophistication by its size, then

this was top drawer. For a moment he worried whether they'd both fit in, and had a sudden fear that he'd be expected

to ride on a wing. 'Latest technology,' the woman, Ace, told him `Got it off the government. Then I modified it a bit.

We'll get there in a couple of hours.'

It didn't seem possible, and he wondered again if he were dreaming, or if, perhaps, the end had come without him

noticing. Would this be his afterlife, then, the continuation of his life's work? That wouldn't be so bad. Had he been a

good enough person that he would finally achieve the successes he'd longed for? That was his idea of heaven: a place

where every species lived still, where man understood them and truly cared.

Àre you sure about this?' he said. 'It's nearly winter there. There'll be blizzards. It'll be pitch black almost all the

time.'

She looked at him as if he'd insulted her. 'Don't worry, mate. I can land anything in anything. This is a piece of cake.

At least no one's shooting at us.'

He admired — ifwas slightly intimidated by— her confidence. But he couldn't share it. 'Er, how well do you know the

area We can't land on the ice floes.'

She sighed. 'Well, it'd better work out all right, that's all I know. Because according to the Doctor, it's already

happened. You already got there. Safe. Me and Benny, we're just filling in the last little piece of the puzzle.'

He opened his mouth to question this incredible statement further, but couldn't think of what to say. Was this

after all some mad kidnap plot, orchestrated by a lunatic who knew of his last desperate desire? He clutched at

something understandable. 'Benny? Who's he? Where's he?'

The girl laughed. 'She's got a chest like an ironing board, but I wouldn't call her a fella if you value your nuts. She's

waiting at the other end. Been gathering equipment from some pals of hers who're partial to cold

temperatures.' There was a pause, and then the girl grinned and said, 'Don't mind me. You're pretty much a hero, the

Doctor says.'

And although Stuart knew he wasn't a hero, wasn't anywhere near a hero, this time he couldn't help but smile back.

The woman Benny had short dark hair and a grin like Emma's, and Stuart liked her instantly. She was sat cross-

legged inside a small tent, waving at them through the swirling snow. *The* equipment she had was unlike anything he'd

seen before; it put him in mind of body armour made from a tortoiseshell rather than the heavily padded insulating

suits he was used to. The boots looked cumbersome and heavy, but Benny assured him they would let him glide across

the snow as though 2

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were lighter than air. He tried it, and laughed in amazement as he found she was telling the

truth. As he skated back, he saw that Ace was helping her friend take down the tent.

`You're leaving?' he said, slightly concerned.

Benny shrugged apologetically. 'I'm afraid it's the rules. We need to be gone before the other bloke gets here. We

haven't happened yet, you see.'

He didn't see. But she smiled at him reassuringly. 'Don't worry. You're not being abandoned. You're not alone. I

promise.'

And because she reminded him of Emma, he believed her.

He stared into the whiteness. The timing had been wonderful, landing during the oh-so-brief sunshine spell of the day.

And he loved it here, loved it even when it was inhumanly cold, but now, in the outfit provided by the Doctor's friend

Benny, there was just the faint chill of an autumn twilight. Ht‘ could —and it came to his thoughts unbidden, the thing

he'd been pushing out of his mind for so long — he could die happy.

Or could he? It wasn't enough just to be here, incredible as that was. He needed an answer. And how could he even

begin to imagine that he would get it? The distance he'd have to cover was phenomenal, would take him years —in

darkness and through blizzards — searching for something that may not even be there any more. And here he was,

not an expedition, not even a man with a plan, but a single soul setting off with all the preparation of someone taking a

stroll in the park. He'd been caught up in the sheer amazement of a man given an impossible prize, and had dwelled on

the prize rather than the impossibility. For to be truly happy, he had to find a needle in a million miles of haystacks, and

the needle might not even exist.

But he wouldn't give up. Better to be here than in his lonely house, reflecting on what might have been. There

was probably still half an hour of light left, and he would start one step at a time, and not worry about what he would do

when darkness came.

He took the first step, and then the next. He discovered that his face mask had a wonderful little attachment which

blew the snow away, giving him a metre or so of clear vision. And he strode on, staring into the endless whiteness.

The whiteness, which had a touch of black.

He stared, raised a gloved hand to rub his visor, which was already clear. The blackness came closer, became a shape.

He imagined — he didn't know why — he could hear a voice calling within the wind, and the voice said, 'I said, the ear

patches need to be bright yellow.' And another voice, an American-accented voice, replying, 'Yeah, yeah, I'm the expert

here, remember?'

And out of the whiteness stepped the last emperor penguin in the world.

Stuart felt tears come unbidden to his eyes. Happiness engulfed him, and he clutched a hand to his heart, exploding

with joy. A second penguin joined the first. A pair! There was still a pair! There was still hope! And then another, and

another. Stuart wept. He had been so scared for so long, but there was hope. The penguins surrounded him, nudging

his hands with their beaks. The blizzard was dying down, and he tore the mask from his face. He noticed that the sea

of birds was parting, creating a path, and looked along it. And there was Emma, his darling, beloved Emma, arms

wide open, welcoming him home.

The multicoloured man stood out ridiculously against the endless white as he knelt down by the figure on the ground. He

raised the visor, and reached out a hand to shut the wide-open eyes. A tall, black-and-white bird waddled over and gazed

down too. He sounded worried. 'Did I do that, Doc?'

The man nodded. 'I think it was in the first instant that he saw you. His heart couldn't stand the shock.'

'So... we, like, killed him)'

A shake of the head. 'No. He was dying. I could tell that from almost the first moment I met him. And he was going

to die alone, and lonely, and feeling that his life had been a failure. And no one who had done what he had done, cared

like he had cared, deserves to die like that. There are few enough humans who care about anything other than humans

and their desires.'

`Yeah, well, I've always been pretty proud of not being human,' said the penguin. 'So you made like the good fairy and

granted his dying wish?'

Ìt seemed like the least I could do.'

Ìf that's the least you could do, I'd love to see it when you push the boat out.' The penguin flapped its wings,

indicating the rapidly darkening snow. Àntarctica. Brings back a

few memories, eh, Doc?'

The man smiled sadly, and looked at his friend the shapeshifter. 'If we'd met here in the year 2040, you wouldn't have

taken on the form ofan emperor penguin.'

The penguin put his head on one side, stared up into blue eyes suddenly bright with tears. 'You mean, there aren't any real

ones left?'

A shake of the head. Not a one.'

And as they walked off together, darkness fell on Antarctica.

The Ethereal

John Binns

On r8 August 204o, a radical group of Back to Earth protesters broadcast the burning of Stephen Le Page, a recently

deceased member of the hitherto unidentified Perseus Corporeal, live on the internet. The impact of that broadcast

was slowed by the reluctance of Tri-V and on-line news services to run the story, but within six hours the footage was

spread over several thousand sites accompanied by text and audio commentaries in every major language on Earth.

Soon, it was impossible for the world's media to ignore the fact that Perseus's cover had been blown, and the

crackpots and conspiracy theorists who had been dismissed for years were vindicated almost overnight.

The weeks and months that followed were especially difficult for the governments of the developed world that had

helped Perseus attain its power. Press releases were issued saying very little about the claims themselves, but appealing for

a period of calm and careful reflection. Senior politicians from government and opposition parties were quick to position

themselves as voices of reason and balance, pointing out the genuine improvements to their constituents' lives that the

Corporation had brought about, and gently reminding them that many of the shareholders were human beings

like themselves. No good would come, they said, of overreactions and scare-mongering.

Nevertheless, the public reacted. Boycotts were organised and jobs were vacated, in a widespread protest against

Perseus's directors. Many claimed that it wasn't the fact of their origins that was the source of the problem, but the

deceit involved in keeping it quiet for so long. It took a sixty-four per cent drop in share prices to force the directors into

a public statement, formally apologising for their former lack of candour. The statement said it was a sad reflection of

social values on Earth as well as elsewhere, that those who were different lived in fear of prejudice and rejection.

There was a natural temptation, it solemnly continued, to hide such differences in the hope that integration would

follow at some later stage.

A substantial movement grew up in the wake of that statement urging tolerance and even legislation to protect the

Earth's 'guests', but for the most part it was soundly rebuffed. Governments and corporations alike quietly began to

withdraw from contracts they had entered into with the Perseus-held companies, despite severe penalty clauses that

almost bankrupted them. Frustratingly for the Corporation, its struggle to cope with the backlash was stymied by a

number of apparently unrelated additional problems, ranging

from the collapse of its Household Assistance Device and Sunbelt projects to teething problems with the new Peacekeeper

AI programs. The final straw came on 3o July when a particularly

nasty worm wiped out the entire diagnostic

network of the lunar-based technical support system, Outpost — on the very day that Perseus announced it had taken

over the company.

More alarmingly, the Back to Earthers' example led to a spate of killings, many of them recorded and broadcast on

line, of senior-level management in Perseus-held companies. Repeated calls for police protection went unheeded until an

incident in mid September, in which the human marketing director of Perseus Finance was burned to death in his home

witnessed by an estimated twelve thousand visitors to the host site, as well as his own wife and children. The incident

was a spur to the developed world's governments to institute tough penal measures and even internment for suspected

agitators. In some local areas passions ran so high that local governments were forced temporarily to impose

martial law.

Meanwhile, via reluctant statements and tell-all interviews with the Tri-V media, details emerged of exactly how and

why Perseus had

become involved in Earth's affairs. As a number of fringe theorists had correctly surmised long ago,

first contact had taken place during the unmanned missions to Jupiter and Saturn in early 2019, when automated

UNASA probes had detected settlements on both planets' moons. A year later, a ship — undetectable to Earth's

scanners — brought the first representatives of Perseus to meet members of the highest levels of the US and GEU

governments. They had introduced themselves as the Perseus Corporeal, a species that had lived for millennia in a

symbiotic relationship with an entity they called 'the Ethereal'.

Perseus's human allies continued to question whether the Ethereal was anything more than an idea, or even some

sort of religion. Nevertheless it was clear that, in the minds of the Corporeal themselves at least, they existed to serve it

and to enable its expansion. They claimed that from its origins in the Perseus constellation, the Ethereal had given rise

to a vast empire across countless worlds, and had produced and acquired unimaginably advanced technology in the

process. Using such technology the Corporeal had been able to take human form, and quickly adapted to Earth's

culture and way of life.

What no one in the developed world's establishments could satisfactorily explain was why they had not seen the

obvious, that the Corporeal's goal must have been to make Earth part of their empire, and to make humans slaves to the

Ethereal as well. But with sustainable energy and other medical, industrial and information technology virtually on

tap, the world's leaders were not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Many of them seemed genuinely to believe

they could rely on the Ethereal's stated philosophy, that it would never wholly or partly incorporate another culture

without its specific informed consent. To others the fact that Perseus typically operated over centuries, or

even millennia, meant that this was simply not a problem in the medium term.

Predictably, however, vast swathes of the populace in those states in which Perseus had gained a foothold disagreed, many of

them violently. By mid November the Chinese, Australian and

European governments had reluctantly taken a view that

Perseus's continued presence in their territories was unsustainable, and issued executive orders that the Corporeal were to be

removed.

Coincidentally or not, the same month saw an increasing number of Corporeal losing their ability to project a human

appearance, the facility apparently switching offwithout warning at the most inconvenient times. The sudden appearance of a

true-form Corporeal, porcine and anaemic, in the middle of an executive board meeting was never likely to help the Ethereal's

cause. As a result, by late November most of the Corporeal had withdrawn entirely from their public roles, and many of them

had gone into hiding.

`So where are we now, Wyatt?'

The Doctor's question was posed solely to relieve the quiet tension that had built up in the people carrier since they had left

the embassy in York. The young field agent CMO had assigned to him was clearly adept at operating the modified-PAN navigation

and tracking system they had integrated into the vehicle, but he was certainly no conversationalist: in fact the Doctor could

have sworn that at least half the calculations and Tri-V images Wyatt was playing with were in fact entirely useless, and

conducted by him purely as a means of avoiding eye contact.

The agent didn't even look up to give his answer. 'Just leaving outskirts of a little town called Northallerton,' he said,

'headed out towards Darlington.' The Doctor stared out at the rain-sodden twilight, contemplating yet more roads of

featureless back-of-beyond. He briefly caught the ghost-image of a young but grim, tired-looking man in the windscreen, his

brown curls lank, his cravate dishevelled, and had a sudden yearning for a long hot bath. Then he looked back at Wyatt's

solemn face, virtually hidden by thick glasses and a thick black beard, wondering if he would add anything more. The Tri-V

display on the left-side windscreen flashed up a small-scale map, scrolling words across its centre. 'Left up ahead,' the young

man added, perhaps by way of a conversational gambit.

`Left it is,' the Doctor nodded.

He slowed the car as they approached the T-junction. The roads were treacherous and badly drained; as the people

carrier's wheels sloshed through the turn, the Doctor registered in his peripheral vision how sheer the drop was from the

roadside to the fields below. By the looks of it, this stretch of road was even worse lit than the one they had just left; he would

have to be careful to avoid a collision. Still, at least it added some interest to the journey.

`Middle of nowhere,' Wyatt seemed to mumble, so quietly that the Doctor barely even heard it.

Ì assume that's the general idea.'

This was their last e 226

xchange of words for over an hour.

`Just here.'

The Doctor had already started to pull over, having registered the three dark-clad figures walking by the side of

the road. 'I thought you said there were two,' he murmured.

`That's two connected Corporeal,' Wyatt said. He turned off the Tri-V display as they left the car. 'The other one

must have been disconnected. And yet it's still with them.' He turned fractionally to face the Doctor, peering at him

over his glasses. 'Interesting.'

Ì'm sure.'

They left the people carrier, slamming the doors shut just for safety. The three figures turned towards them. One

was a tall man, lean and muscular, with a smart full-length coat over an expensive-looking, if rain-soaked, business

suit. The second was a young woman, her long red hair protected under a large black umbrella. The third, its features

barely concealed by an ill-fitting parka, was a wretched-looking female creature, one of the Corporeal in its natural

form. The beast was naked under its coat, revealing spindly legs and skin that was goose-pimpled and piglet-pink. Its

face was half:hidden beneath the parka hood, but the Doctor could make out a small snout and slit-mouth, and deep red

marks across the paleness of its jaw line as if it had been bruised or beaten.

Ìt's you.' The male figure had actually taken a step back before catching himself. `CMO's Doctor.'

It took the Doctor a moment to make the connection. 'Phillip Green,' he acknowledged eventually. The man seemed no

different physically from when they had met a few months earlier, but the self-assured way he held himself had gone,

and there was a distinct look of tiredness about his eyes. The Doctor fancied he might be losing his hair as well. They all

stood there for a few seconds, in the rain, saying nothing.

`Come on, into the car.' Wyatt beckoned to the three figures as a group, and they started moving without a word. The

female Corporeal had to drag the disconnected creature by the arm.

Green took the seat behind the Doctor. The young woman and the creature sat on the back row. They slammed the

doors quickly behind them, shutting the dismal world outside. Green introduced his companion as Andrea, and said

the creature was called Emily.

`So where to, Doctor?' the woman said lightly. Her tone was deeply sarcastic. She knew very well what was

happening.

`We were sent to bring you to an emergency sitting of the northern English

assembly,' Wyatt said, as if he had rehearsed it. 'It's a temporary seat of government, in what used to be the Bowes

Museum in Barnard's Castle. We set up there after the bio-scare last year. It's pretty much UN property now.'

Ànd what are we needed there for?' Green was wiping the rain off his face. The woman had taken a tight hold of the

disconnected creature, gripping its slender torso with both her arms. She had lowered the hood, revealing basic, half-

formed ears and a pair of tiny pink eyes, which seemed to want to look at anything but her.

The European government wants dialogue,' the Doctor said, when it looked as if Wyatt was going to add nothing

more. 'It's in no one's interests to let things drag on in this fashion indefinitely. They want to reach some

understanding.'

Ìn other words,' Green smiled, 'the terms of our surrender.'

The Doctor smiled. 'You could say that.'

He started up the car. No one said anything as he put it into gear, and returned it deftly to the road. In an attempt

to lighten the mood a little, after three minutes he said, 'I'm really sorry we had to bring a people carrier, chaps. No

offence intended, obviously. I did suggest we change the name,

all things considered, but they weren't having any of it.'

There was no response to that, so he kept his eyes on the road and said nothing else. For an hour or so there was no

sound in the car, except for the rain battering down on the roof, and the occasional sob and grunt from the wretched

creature in the back.

`We need to reconnect her now,' the woman Corporeal was saying. 'I don't know if I can stand this much longer.'

She and Green had been talking for some time, but too softly for the Doctor to hear their words. Now though, the

woman's tone had become more strident, more urgent. Her last few words were almost shouted, in order to be heard

above the hellish sound of the disconnected animal shrieking.

know,' the male Corporeal said. He reached back to touch the animal's cheek. His hand wavered over it as the people

carrier bumped briefly over an uncertain stretch of road. The creature seemed to calm slightly. The Doctor cleared his

throat, turned back to face his passengers.

Àre you all right back there?' he asked them.

Àndrea is worried about Emily,' Green said. 'It should be possible to reconnect her to the Ethereal, but we need a

powerful enough PAN connection to do it. I'm also not sure whether we've left it too late to be absolutely sure that the

reconnection will work.'

Ì'm not clear on why,' the Doctor said. 'If it's simply a matter of the Ethereal signal being picked up by a receiver

in the brain, then surely...'

Ìt's not the signal that's the problem,' Green cut in. 'The Ethereal

network doesn't vary in strength, and there will

always be a mechanism in Emily's

brain to pick it up. The difficulty is the Earth-based relay for the signal:

something we had to improvise at short notice a couple of decades ago,

and which we've been working on improving since. It's losing

power,' he continued with a weary smile, 'because since we scrapped our

smaller-scale version on Io, we've relied on our human partners to keep

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The Ethereal was spread across billions of life forms on thousands of

worlds, in hundreds upon hundreds of star systems. As such, it had a

was this knowledge that enabled it to take a philosophical view of, say, the events on this world in the year 2040. All of

Perseus's stories ended somehow; this was merely the end of its story on Earth.

It could easily have been different, in fact. The timing, and the associated problems in this particular year had made

it difficult to recover from the public unmasking of the Corporeal's form. But even with the very short time it had

had to establish a presence, the Ethereal had become integrated into almost every aspect of human life. Indeed,

even after Perseus lost its influence, the ideologies of Earth enabled the Ethereal to go on for some considerable time

without it. The remaining shareholders of the Corporation consulted on a rights issue in early 2041, and narrowly

managed to recover much of their lost profits from the previous year. Many of the projects Perseus had initiated

continued for several years hence: it simply made good economic sense for the corporate objectives it had set in

motion, including the position it took in just over two dozen armed conflicts across the planet, to be continued pending

any good business reason to replace them. The Corporation retained its legal identity, and its new directors

were of course duty bound to continue the work of expansion, in the interests of their (mostly corporate) shareholders. In

terms of real estate alone, Perseus owned more property in each nation per head of population than any single legal

entity since the time of the feudal barons.

Nor did Perseus's governments readily abandon the credos that the Corporeal had set in place. To a large

extent expansion was second nature to them anyway, and the technology Perseus provided was easily adapted for the

purposes of national and regional governments. The eventual break-up of two out of the four main power blocs on the

planet, taking place over a painful decade between 2050 and 2060, occurred almost exactly as Perseus had planned.

The role it had taken in aiding certain religious faiths and political ideologies was absolutely pivotal to the reshaping of

the world's ideological map over the course of the latter half of the twenty-first century. All that was missing was a

formal connection to the Ethereal. If the short-lived revival of interest in the idea — raised by scientists who analysed a

Corporeal brain stem in the year 2061 — had taken hold, then the Ethereal would have consolidated the power it had

amassed by proxy and incorporated Earth as part of its empire. Unfortunately, no reserves were available from

neighbouring star systems at the relevant time.

If the Ethereal had been given to making comparisons between its client worlds, it might have found the

differences between Earth and its most similar neighbours quite instructive. On Tetra Persei Two, the process of

integrating the sentient population into the Ethereal took the equivalent of four to five thousand years, or in

their terms, just over a thousand generations. With no advanced technological base and no sophisticated

monetary system, the most lucrative method available was to integrate the

societies' elders, building up an allegiance to Perseus as part of the hierarchical tradition laid down over the

centuries. By the time of first contact with a close neighbour species, the Perseus Ethereal and the Forefathers' Edicts

were virtually one and the same. On Mirphak, by the time of the Corporeal's arrival there was already a complex and

dominant value system in place, a combined system of myths and moral/legal norms that its followers called 'Ica' (or

`vision'). The subversion of that system so that it more aptly followed the Ethereal's line was relatively simple — it had to

be adapted, anyway, to cope with the concept of alien life — but again, the process had taken some centuries. By contrast,

on Menkib, the chosen entry point was an electronic system for generating complex thought, prosaically titled the Second

Great Mind, to which the dominant nations had already deferred a great deal of their decision-making Though some

checks were in place and decisions had to be properly presented and rationalised, the task of turning this over entirely to

the Ethereal's agenda was actually accomplished in a matter of seconds.

Perhaps, if it had planned more carefully, a combination of these methods would have given the Ethereal a better chance

to have taken hold on Earth for a longer time. Perhaps if it had reflected on the matter in hindsight, it would have

concluded that a slower method should have been adopted — one less susceptible to rejection once the Corporeal's origins

were revealed. But the Ethereal wasn't given to making such comparisons or reflecting with hindsight, and it didn't

understand the concept of regret.

`Doctor.'

The sound of Green's voice roused the Doctor briefly from his single-minded focus on the road ahead. He craned his

neck round to the left to acknowledge it for a second, and saw the tight grip of his right hand on the leather upholstery of

the Doctor's chair. His left hand was stretched behind him, holding on tightly to Andrea's hand as she lay back, half-

asleep, on the back seat. Emily was quiet now, sleeping off the portion and a half of chips she'd consumed at their brief

stop half an hour ago.

`Green.'

Ì want to be a hundred per cent sure that we can't use the PAN connection we've got here to reconnect Emily,' Green

said, his voice lowered so as not to wake his companions. 'You're sure the specs aren't good enough for it?'

The Doctor looked over at Wyatt, who obligingly shook his head. He returned his eyes to the road.

`When we get to the building, then. We can surely do it there.'

The Doctor said nothing. The windscreen wipers quickened their speed, fighting to keep pace with the rain. Still an

eerie glow of green and orange came from Wyatt's Tri-V display.

`But then again, I don't suppose reconnecting the Corporeal is high on

CMO's agenda. I'm surprised,' Green said raising his voice to a bitter hiss, `you even bother taking us to this building

at all.'

`Well —'

`You might just as well shoot us,' Green continued, 'rather than keep up this charade of negotiations and talks. This is a

massacre. Those Back-to-Earthers aren't the worst of them at all: it's the governments; it's people like you, Doctor,

with your sordid little secret schemes, your pathetic attempts at sabotage...'

If anyone else in the car had heard this, they didn't show any sign. With his head bowed over the keypad, looking up

only as the Tri-V display changed and flickered, Wyatt gave a strong impression of inhabiting a world of his own.

`You've got no one but yourselves to blame for this.' The Doctor turned back to look at Green. 'It's you who decided

to come here, to make Earth a part of your empire. You deceived your way into positions of power, and now you're

paying the price.'

`You can't approve of the bloodshed,' Green countered. 'You could at least have prevented this, if you knew what was

going on...'

`Perhaps I did,' the Doctor snapped, and he tapped his forehead lightly, making sure that Green saw the long rough

scar on his wrist where the tracer implant had been removed.

'But, you know, it must have slipped my mind.'

Ì don't think,' Green bunched his right hand into a fist, 'you have the first idea about what you're saying. The

Corporeal don't make decisions for our own sake; we exist to serve...'

Ì know, I know. You're following orders, you've no other options; the dog probably ate your homework. I don't care,'

the Doctor spat, 'whether this Ethereal construct of yours is something that speaks through you or which you've

created for your own ends. What I care about is what it's been doing.'

`Now hold on a moment.' Green held up his hands, a gesture of honesty. `Nothing we've done has been underhand, or

without specific assistance from the authorities,' he said. 'Whereas what you've been doing against us is just petty,

single-minded vandalism.'

The Doctor smiled at him broadly. 'I do hope so,' he said.

Ì can understand,' Green went on, 'how having it confirmed that we weren't from this planet has caused a

hostile reaction. What I can't understand is how random it's been: there's been no organised campaign, no declaration

of war.'

`Puzzling, isn't it?' 23t1he Doctor agreed. He hadn't looked back at the road for more than a minute now. He vaguely

hoped they were still on the road. 'It's almost as if some unscrupulous people were deliberately trying to muck up your

plans, meddling in your business and chucking stuff around, out of nothing more than spite and mischief. Hardly

sporting, is it?'

Ì don't —'

Ànd you know, it's interesting you should mention the organisation aspect.

If I had anthg to do with this I'd make sure all the little rumours, all the

boycotts, all the smear campaigns, could be linked together on some sort

of network. Don't you think/ I suppose if you were clever enough, you could

even design a piece of software that could seek out these campaigns and

somehow link them up. You could pair it with a computer virus that

attacked your companies' data facilities, perhaps. Strangely enough,

there's no shortage of volunteers among your version ten Peacekeepers to

help out with that sort of thing. Ironic, don't you think?'

Ìf you're saying —'

Ì mean, what did you think Mr Wyatt had been doing all this time,

while we've been driving? It's not as if meddling and mischief just gets

itself done, you know.'

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onto its right side with an agonising crash. The Doctor had just enough time to register the sight of a single figure

clambering from a rear passenger door before the delayed shock of the impact knocked him out.

When the Doctor came to, Wyatt was standing over him. The young man held out an arm to help him up.

`How long have I been out?' the Doctor spluttered. He took a moment to steady himself, wiped some of the mud from

his face.

`Ten minutes or so,' Wyatt said.

`What happened to Green?'

`He's over there.' Wyatt motioned with his arm. 'He's pretty badly wounded. I couldn't see any point in moving

him.'

The Doctor frowned. 'What about the other two?'

Wyatt shook his head. 'They died in the crash,' he said briskly. He took his PAN from his pocket, brandishing it as if

to make a point. 'I've been on to the CMG guys at the Bowes building. They're sending someone for us. In other news,'

he continued lightly, 'the round-up programs are working pretty well. Pollux estimates there won't be much left of

Perseus by the morning.'

The Doctor nodded. Mercifully, the rain had lightened, but his clothes and hair were drenched, matted with dirt and

water. He brushed his hair out of his eyes and strands of it flopped wetly on to his forehead, stroking it clammily, like

dead fingers.

Ì'll see how Green's doing.'

He trudged across the field to where Green lay. He was face-up in the mud, his eyes wide open. His suit was spattered

and caked with grime, the creases and tears no doubt irreparable. He tried to get up, with no success, when he saw the

Doctor approaching.

Èmily. Andrea,' he managed to say. His face was pale, his forehead bloody. The Doctor crouched down by his side.

`They got away,' he told him gently. 'Too quick for us, as it turns out.' Green's expression didn't change. 'And I

suppose that's it for us,' he said at length. 'No reconnection, no base on Earth. You've stopped it.'

`That I have, yes,' the Doctor said.

`But not forever.' Green coughed painfully. 'And not everywhere. The Ethereal survives. It always does.'

The Doctor said nothing. It had started raining again.

`There might still be time, you know.' His gaze met the Doctor's. 'For me, I mean. For some of the Corporeal. We

needn't be a threat. There's no need to wipe us out'

The Doctor's eyebrows raised.

`What do you want me to do?'

With what seemed like a gigantic effort, Green raised his left arm, and handed his PAN to the Doctor. It was caked

in mud.

`Call off those programs of yours. Let the companies survive. Allow us a little time for the Ethereal relay to recover.'

The Doctor just stared at him.

`Please.'

N against his palm, looked at it closely. Though smeared with dirt and grime, its display panel lit

up, ready for use.

Green had lain back, exhausted.

Ì'm sorry,' the Doctor told him. 'I'm afraid it's dead.'

A few seconds later the human form lying before the Doctor began to flicker and fade, like a dying flame. The

weakling, pathetic creature that lay in its place was almost completely white.

The Doctor watched for a moment as the mud lapped and swirled around its body.

It was true that each of the Ethereal's stories had a beginning, a middle and an end; it had always accepted this as an

inevitable fact of life. It was also true that there were patterns to be found in the ends of all its stories, although the

Ethereal was not given to looking for patterns in Corporeal lives. Each story had an end, that was all. It did not occur to

it to ask why that should be.

The end of the Ethereal on Tetra Persei Two came with the collapse of the Forefathers' Edicts, which in turn came from

their followers' contact with a delegation from another world. A mediator from beyond both their worlds ensured that

the contact was peaceful, and in the process demolished the belief on which the Edicts — and the Ethereal — had

been founded. On Mirphak, the spiritual heart of thèka' followers' society was so ingrained that it took centuries for

rival principles to take root, but over generations a select few thinkers began to question its norms, applying scientific

rigour and rational principles in place of superstition and

deference. Here again, at crucial points in their history

there was often one man, a loose cannon who championed the dissident thinkers. When, eventually, the last vestiges of the

`ka' faith were removed from government by force, it was the Doctor and his companions who led the storming of the

palace. On Menkib, the complex thoughts of the Second Great Mind had been comprehensively altered, just as quickly as

they had been by the Ethereal, when its core programming was turned upside down during a brief chat with the

Doctor's TARDIS.

There were many hundreds of other worlds whose stories ended in similar ways — not with grand plans or

declarations of war, not with mobilisations of troops, but with a handful of small-scale irritants and dissenters, who

eventually reached a critical mass. If it had noticed the pattern, it might have occurred to the Ethereal to ask how the

Doctor had managed to become such a dominant influence in its life. It might even have appreciated the elegance with

which its final days on all its worlds had been made to occur simultaneously.

But the Ethereal didn't think like that, and so it didn't appreciate the elegance. Nor did it often occur to it to beg the

Doctor for its life. Certainly there was never any concerted effort to persuade the Doctor that it should go on living,

which at times the Doctor found surprising. But, of course, it wouldn't have been a persuasive argument it was only with

a stretch of the imagination that it could be called a life form at all. For all its influence and power, for all that it certainly

had an existence in the minds of its Corporeal, the Doctor remained deeply sceptical that the Ethereal had ever truly been

a living creature.

But despite all that, and without much reservation, it gave him immense satisfaction to have killed it.

Document Outline

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